

DOUBLE ISSUE

OCTOBER 1994

ELLERY QUEEN®

THE WORLD'S LEADING
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

A BUMPER CROP OF CRIME

Kate Wilhelm
Doug Alyn
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PLUS 14 OTHERS

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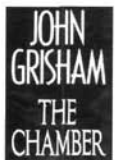
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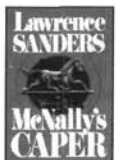
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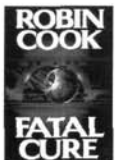
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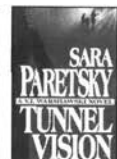
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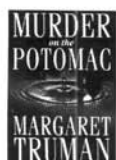
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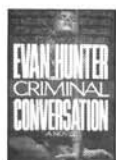
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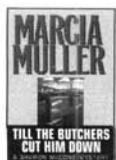
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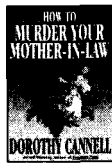
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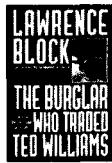
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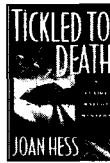
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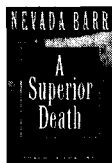
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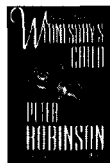
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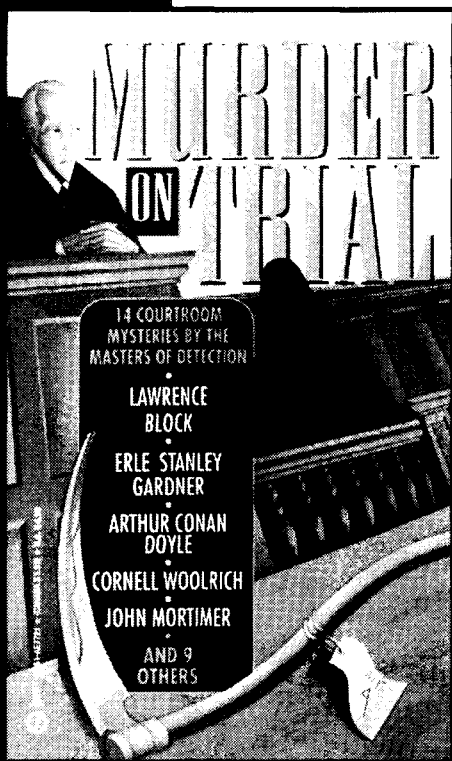
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For many years pseudonymous author Jeffry Scott was a reporter for the London Daily Mail. These days, he's a Daily Mail editor, and a very prolific short story writer as well. Mr. Scott has an eye to all that goes on in the mystery field, and in the book business generally, since one of his editorial responsibilities is to scout for books to be serialized in his newspaper. . . .

THE PASSING OF MR. TOAD

by **JEFFRY SCOTT**

The day was idyllic, almost uncannily perfect. That made what followed seem so much worse.

I remember standing with one foot up on the log, morning woodland scents blending with the aroma from a mug of coffee in my hand, and feeling a rare sense of awe and gratitude, my nearest approach to a religious response. Appropriate, since it was Sunday.

If you have no patience for ain't-nature-grand and This-sceptred-isle stuff, skip the next bit. But be assured that it's relevant . . .

My cottage being set among trees, a formal garden (any garden apart from spring bulbs in concrete tubs, replaced by bedding plants come summer) is a waste of time. There's a patio, a ledge I hacked out of the hillside, with a tree trunk set at the edge to stop me strolling over the brink after the second or third sundowner. The ground falls away so steeply that standing out there is like riding in the basket of a hot-air balloon.

St. Mary's is a ten-minute walk away but the little church's steeple is only yards off in a straight line, and almost directly below my place; one looks *down* on the gilded weathercock instead of up at it. As for the surroundings . . . What do they boast about in Ireland, a

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hundred shades of green, a thousand? We have a mere fifty along the Drawbel Valley, but that's enough. Trees and bushes, mainly rhododendrons run wild since the heyday of a landscaped and manicured Victorian estate. Some laurels, many pines, and at a widened turn of the zigzag track, a veteran cedar to shade the horses when carriages brought ladies to the house to execute anaemic watercolours on clement days, last century.

Admiring all that, I was half asleep, caused by being very late to bed, and up early. To, as the old joke goes, get home again. An ignoble part of my mind—men really are the limit, some of us, that is—was gloating. Nothing adds spice to an affair like conducting it in secrecy. My partner was unmarried, but she had an image to protect. As a bachelor with no image to speak of, I cared less about keeping village gossips in the dark. But she was the boss.

Out there on the patio, another side of me was enquiring what had happened to my scorn for no-future flings, and warned that any amount of issue-confronting and assessment of emotions lay ahead. Conscience nagged that I wasn't a teenager. Nor, for that matter, was the lady.

But all that faded as I took another look across the valley. My end of the Drawbel is deep and narrow, the wound left by a titanic axe—how *that* simile made me wince in hindsight! As mist burned off, the landscape emerged like a photograph defining in developer fluid. Trees, the steeple, houses amid greenery on the far slopes were all fresh-minted, in that overture to a glorious summer day. Intellect insisted that Bristol, no small city, was only ten miles away, but it might as well have been a million.

"Dear God, it's pretty," I mumbled inadequately, and smacked my lips over the coffee, which had no chance of keeping me sleepless. Aching to get to bed yet too idle to move, I compromised by sitting on the fallen tree.

Right after the event I kept telling myself, "Nobody ought to die on a day like this." It showed how shaken I was. Not the hardened man of semi-action (witnessed a lot, partaken of little) that vanity had suggested. Before lucking out with the novels, I was a trained observer—sounds better than reporter, don't you think?—and had seen a fair amount of violence and carnage. Was shot at, arrested by the breed of police imposing force rather than upholding laws, survived an air raid: standard been-there-done-that experiences of most foreign correspondents.

None of that prepared me for what befell poor Ben Basgate . . .

Living on the edge of Petticoat Wood ought to have accustomed me to lethal violence. Stoats and weasels kill rabbits, foxes kill hens (and rabbits), magpies kill songbirds even before they hatch. The rabbits don't get much of a look-in, but are known to kill their own young, not to mention endless vegetation, and so it goes, day and night on my doorstep. However, human beings count more in the scheme of things. Or so they believe.

But given the context of that cathedral hush and almost daunting beauty, death was unthinkable. When it struck, the impact was all the greater.

I must have dozed, surfacing with a stiff neck and clutching a mug of cold coffee, some of its spilt contents soaking my jeans. It was about nine o'clock, birds sang and there was the faintest whisper of traffic on distant, invisible roads, sounds giving the amphitheater added texture, somehow.

And gradually I became aware of another instrument in the orchestra, suggesting the rattle of a busy woodpecker, but slowed down and oddly close, though it could not be. *Tock . . . tock . . . tock*. Certain noises do float across the valley in still weather, possibly echoing off the slate tiles of St. Mary's steeple to reach me so clearly.

The measured knocking aroused my curiosity. I knuckled my eyes and gazed around for the source.

A flash of pillar-box red drew my attention. Monks Farm was better than a quarter-mile away on the opposite side of the valley, its chimneys puncturing the froth of trees like masts poking from green clouds. The red fleck was a lot lower down, about the level of the farmhouse's front lawn. My vision is less than hawklike, but I gathered that Ben Basgate was up and about.

The majority of local folk had no time for Ben, regarding him as a traitor of sorts. Village small-mindedness and envy shaped that opinion. It's the classic can't-win syndrome of country communities anywhere in the world—I have recognised the phenomenon from Australia to America, Vietnam to, well, England. Anyone leaving a village to better himself is scorned as a loser if he fails, a show-off if he comes back . . .

Ben Basgate was no loser. He quit school at fifteen, ran away to London, made money in advertising, and amassed more by selling out and going into the restaurant business. After his widowed father died, Ben came home to the valley to take over the farm.

His idea of agriculture disgusted Drawbel's opinion makers. In their eyes he let the holding go to rack and ruin, compounding

the sin by getting paid for it because Common Market regulations encourage farmers to leave their fields fallow. Set-aside subsidies was the name of the game, and didn't it put local noses out of joint when Ben Basgate cashed in.

He ran a pop festival on his derelict acres—the village loved that three-day ordeal and the mess left in its wake—to turn a supposedly tax-free profit. Ben opened a “farm shop” stocked with stuff bought at city cash-and-carry outlets, passing it off as organically raised on the premises . . . until county council snoops closed it down.

There was no harm in him, but then I didn't live near Monks Farm, except as the crow flies. Half his larks were dreamed up to annoy the natives, simple as that. We got on fine; my secret nickname for Ben Basgate was Mr. Toad, he had that *Wind in the Willows* air of self-importance and innocent glee at being himself. A hairless head, bulging eyes, and wide mouth endorsed my label.

The one I felt sorry for was his nephew, Tom Oates. Tom had always wanted to be a farmer. So when Ben went off to seek his fortune and his dad got doddering, there was Tom Oates to act as proxy son and work the place for him. In an ideal world he would have inherited Monks Farm. As it was, Ben kept him on as manager, though precious little remained to manage. All credit to him, Tom stood up for his uncle, though privately he must have agonised over Ben's misuse of prime land.

Anyway, I lounged on my log, emulating the proverbial bump, watching a speck of red and wondering what the man wearing it might be doing. Ben never went outdoors without that baseball cap. All I could make out was the spot of color, but it seemed to be bobbing to and fro. Every now and then came a silver flash . . . And that *tock* would stammer across the valley.

It took minutes for the message to sink in. Then I jumped up and, ludicrously, shouted, “Oi, stop it! Ben, stop that!” My voice sounded hoarse and feeble, as well it might.

The cheek, the nerve, the . . . sheer Mr. Toadness going on over there, appalled me.

Of course the vandal had got up early. Of course the red cap was moving in an arc with the rest of Ben Basgate. Of course steel caught the sun from time to time.

To explain: Monks Farm was rather grand, in its mid-Victorian, box-of-nursery-bricks way. Three floors, a pillared porch, gravel drive—and in the center of the lawn, soaring thirty feet or so, one of the finest monkey-puzzle trees in the county. Ben Basgate claimed

that it was an eyesore, darkening his lounge. He had threatened to cut it down (largely to annoy his neighbours, whom he taunted as stick-in-the-muds). They, as inimical neighbours will, whispered in councillors' ears, and as councils will, ours slapped a preservation order on the monkey puzzle. An Englishman's home is his castle, but only while council planners aren't looking.

Now Mr. Toad was having the last word by chopping the thing down. The worst that could occur was a fine of a few hundred pounds. Knowing Ben Basgate, he'd consider it money well spent. The subsequent row, daunting to most people, would strike him as a bonus . . .

The axe swung, and an instant later the sound of steel on timber bounced off the spire below me. *Tock*, pause, *tock*. Evidently he was tiring. Ben was no lumberjack, but a bald, podgy amateur.

Dithering, first I made for the cottage, meaning to phone him. Then I changed direction to the garage. He might ignore the phone, always supposing he heard it out there, but a visitor couldn't be overlooked. Only it would take me a quarter-hour to drive down the zigzag track—very slowly if I wanted the muffler in place on reaching the road—and get to Monks Farm. So maybe the phone was a better idea after all, though the chances were that the monkey puzzle was past saving, either way.

Confirming my pessimism, a creaking, tearing noise rippled through still air, followed by a faint crash from over there. A scribble of birds defaced the sky over Monks Farm, danced briefly, and erased itself. I stood still, caught between cursing and laughter.

Mr. Toad had been and gone and done it, my word he had.

If it's not labouring the point, we had plenty more trees around Drawbel. And I have never been fond of monkey puzzles with their multiple "tails" of branches; for my money they're grotesquely ornate unless it's ornately grotesque, like so many ugly examples of Victoriana.

All the same, I got the car out and set off to see Ben. The man was a fool to himself, and needed to be reminded of it before the lynch mob arrived. Not a real necktie party, but Peter Stuckey and his shrewish wife were probably phoning round the village by now, stirring up trouble for Ben. The Stuckeys were "proper farmers," Ben Basgate's nearest neighbors, and they detested him. He was quite likely to jeer when they turned up to protest, and that might well increase the amount of his fine when the inevitable case came to court and they gave evidence. Ben could spare whatever the magistrates decreed—on the other hand, I was the nearest thing he had

to a friend, and owed him advice. The fact that Mr. Toad would ignore it was another matter . . .

"Idiot!" I said out loud.

It didn't take long to reach Monks Farm, once out of Petticoat Wood. You go half a mile in the opposite direction, then up the dog-leg of lane to Ben Basgate's home, the Stuckeys' place, and a few other dwellings.

Gravel sputtered under my tires and suddenly the car was skidding across Ben's drive because I'd tramped on the brakes. I jerked forward and stalled with a nasty, expensive sound which I forgot about until the following day.

The monkey puzzle was down all right, its tip spearing across the lawn. About halfway along the trunk, a foot and a hand were visible under the tangle of bottle-brush tails of foliage. I got out, mouth dry, fighting that underwater-walking sensation of nightmares.

Gross, heartless humour is a blessing at such times. It's a form of anaesthetic. Going down on one knee, I pawed among the leafy monkey tails, telling myself that if Ben Basgate wasn't dead, then he had found a way of surviving with his head and chest smashed flat. As a matter of form I tried for a pulse in his wrist, and of course there was none.

"What the hell are you playing at?"

The angry shout made me gasp and topple sideways, heart hammering. Tom Oates barged past, only to recoil, a hand clamped over his mouth. "God . . . it's Uncle Ben."

"Come away," I gabbled, "we can't do anything." Tom looked terrible, as well he might—pallor startling in contrast to all that blue-black hair, shiny with grease.

"We've got to get him out," Tom whimpered. He was thirty-five, a stolid, sturdy, thoroughly capable man, but shock had reduced him to a faltering youngster. He started wrenching at the nearest branches, teeth bared, a vein rising on his forehead; I had to wrestle him back.

"Tom! He's past help. Use your head, they'll need lifting gear to shift this thing." I cleared my throat. "I think we're supposed to leave everything as it is. For the police."

Not appearing to take that in, he demanded, "What's been going on here?"

"What does it look like? You must have heard the tree come down." Tom lived in a bungalow a few hundred yards along the lane.

He blinked at me, working things out. "Yes . . . it would have made a right racket. I was cleaning house, it's my day for it. Had the music on." He was wearing jeans and T-shirt, and now I noticed the Walkman clipped to his belt with the earphones slung round his neck, stethoscope fashion. "Saw you drive past like a madman, thought there might be a fire here or something," Tom explained.

"You'd better ring for . . . well, an ambulance, I guess. And the police."

Tom didn't move. Face twisting, he muttered, "Uncle, Uncle, what *did* you think you were doing?" Gently I drew him away. In the end I had to make the calls. Doglike, Tom simply refused to leave the body.

I sat on the doorstep, wishing I hadn't given up smoking. The next twenty minutes were interminable. After ten of them, I badgered him into going indoors and making us a cup of tea. He needed distraction.

Swept off his head by a flying branch, Ben's baseball cap caught my eye. Automatically I picked it up and set the thing on a window ledge, wiping my fingers afterwards. Dismiss it as squeamishness, but while I can handle blood, literally or metaphorically, there was something uncommonly disturbing about the momentary touch of a dead man's sweat . . .

Stan Ethrington beat the ambulance to the scene. We don't have a village bobby anymore, but PC Ethrington lives in the area, so we see more of him than his colleagues. He was in gardening togs, grass-stained flannels and green rubber boots. "The coroner's office will be along soon, but County HQ gave me a bell, seeing as I'm nearest."

Then Stan, repeating Tom Oates, asked, "What're you doing here, Billy?"

"I saw it happen. Sort of. Heard him chopping away at that damned tree, you know how sound carries on a day like this. Heard it come down. Dashed over to act as umpire in case Pete Stuckey and his she-devil were giving Ben a hard time. And I found . . . this. Him."

"Ah. Then you had better wait for PC Dennis, he's the coroner's officer." Stan Ethrington gave the monkey puzzle and its victim a cursory examination. He sighed and shook his head. "Typical, eh? Mr. Basgate was a bit childish, for all his smart business ways. See-and-must-have kind of style, no foresight. Did you think he meant it about doing away with the old monkey puzzler? 'Course not. But

the fancy took him, and that was it. . . . My kids are just the same, but the oldest is six, so there's some excuse."

He wasn't being snide, just expressing oblique regret for Ben. "Wouldn't care to fell anything that was taller than me," he continued. "Seems simple, but there's more to it than you'd bargain for. Downright dangerous—shame he wasn't much for stopping and thinking."

"The trunk looks quite slim," I agreed, "it must have seemed easy to deal with." And then everybody arrived at once: the ambulance, the police surgeon in tennis whites and a brand-new Volvo, and the coroner's officer, a kid looking hardly old enough to shave, aboard a motorbike.

The ambulance men could do nothing for Ben Basgate, but Tom Oates was in a pitiable state, shaking uncontrollably, so they bore him away to Barford General "just to be on the safe side."

Cherubic PC Dennis took my statement, and he and Stan measured the tree and charted its position in relation to the body and the front of the house, with Dennis photographing everything for good measure.

Once I told them what little I could, there was—for me, at least—an awkward pause. PC Dennis and Stan Ethrington had to wait for County HQ to send a mobile crane, unlikely to appear swiftly on a Sunday. "If I don't get some sleep soon," I yawned, "I shall fall over. If you don't need me any more . . ."

"Off you go, sir," said PC Dennis. But I didn't, for a minute. Illogically, it seemed wrong to slope off and leave Ben Basgate, tragic Mr. Toad, pinned there waiting to be tidied away. "That's his cap, it's how I spotted him," I said. "I'm afraid I moved it, picked it up, don't know why."

"Not to worry," said Stan. "Get home, Billy, you've done all you can."

And so I had. Though not the way that either of us meant, let alone understood.

The inquest did not last long. Tom Oates, stilted and uneasy in his Sunday-best suit, gave evidence of identity, a pathologist stated that Benjamin Harold Basgate, a fifty-eight-year-old male, had died of multiple injuries. I gave my two-pennyworth about hearing the chopping noises and becoming aware of what Ben was doing.

PC Dennis was surprisingly authoritative, though even younger-looking in the courtroom. He produced photographs of the monkey

puzzle's severed trunk, and a chart showing the tree upright, with a large V-shaped notch a couple of feet from the ground and another smaller one on the opposite side. "Deceased obviously intended to throw the tree, make it fall, that is, away from the house. Apparently he misjudged the amount of wood to leave in place, stepped back to judge the direction the tree would topple, and was crushed when it fell the wrong way."

Verdict: misadventure. Mr. Foster, the coroner, added a warning, "which I hope the press will promulgate" about the danger illustrated by the accident. It was a tragic reminder that tree felling was a task for professionals. The press, a girl trainee from the *Drawbel Weekly News*, blushed and nodded and scribbled away; some of us exchanged wry smiles. Charlie Foster's son-in-law happens to run a landscape gardening business, timber felling a speciality. Still, the coroner's point was valid . . .

The funeral at St. Mary's was better attended than I expected, a cynical view being that certain Drawbel citizens were pleased to see the back of Ben. Talking of which, Peter Stuckey was there with Iris—nothing like a service for the dead to bring British hypocrisy to life. Waiting to enter, I fell into conversation with Stuckey, a big, grizzled fellow with a face like a turnip lantern.

Probably he guessed my thoughts about humbug, for he began defensively, "Never liked the chap, but nobody would have wished that on him. Bloody fool." As with Stan Ethrington's similar remark, Stuckey's voice held more compassion than contempt.

"Ben would be alive today if me and the missus had been home," he asserted. "Blimey, if you could hear him all the way over to Petticoat Wood, we wouldn't have missed it. I'd have been round in two shakes to stop him. He was breaking the law, right? But our Jenny's just had her baby, the missus was on fire to see the first grandson. We set off before it was light, to get back in time for evening milking."

He'd solved a minor puzzle: why the busybody Stuckeys hadn't intervened that morning. Then the roof of the hearse came into sight over the churchyard hedge, and we all trooped in.

My attention wandered during the service. I spent much of it admiring Selina Grace. Her designer suit might be a little too much for a country funeral, but then Selina ran a boutique in Bristol and always dressed to the nines.

The coffin stayed on trestles in the chancel when the service ended. Ben was to be cremated. Tom Oates and a trio of elderly

strangers whom I took to be distant relatives left together. I fell into step beside Selina.

"Poor Tom," she murmured, "he looks dreadful."

"He'll get over it." He looked a damned sight better than he had last Sunday. But then so did I, no doubt.

"That's you all over, offhand, shrugging everything off. Tom loved that man. It's hard to think of Ben as fatherly, more of a big kid himself, but he *was* Tom's uncle—and Tom lost his own parents when he was young."

"True," I agreed soothingly. And more quietly, "I must be responsible for every second message on your answering machine. We've got to talk."

Frowning, Selina whispered, "You do pick your moments. I'll phone when I'm ready. Not today, I've got to help Tom, those dodderly third cousins or whatever expect a funeral tea." She hurried after them, disclosing rather a lot of elegant thigh while getting into the funeral director's boxy limo.

Trudging up the zigzag path through the trees, I loosened my black tie and undid the shirt collar. Tom Oates had invited me back to Monks Farm, too, but I'd lied about having to take a timed call from overseas. Funerals are bad enough, let alone the old-fashioned aftermath of tea and sandwiches and guarded jubilation over the mourners' survival.

Selfishly, I consigned Mr. Toad to the past, concentrating on Selina Grace and the fact that despite appearances, we were more than casual friends. Was it a simple reflex—until recently I had been celibate for a long while—or something deeper? And what did she want or expect or dread from me?

Not for the first time, I decided that platonic relationships had a lot going for them. The drawback being that they are less fun . . . Half the trouble was that knowing myself best, I was deeply suspicious of my motives.

Selina was gorgeous, and "spoken for," as this part of the world says when a couple aren't officially engaged yet might marry some day. That made her doubly interesting, God forgive me. I can resist anything save temptation, and the lure of the forbidden runs it a close second. I liked her a lot, it could be love, but initially at least, Selina had represented a challenge.

I hadn't chased her. We knew each other, that was all—for a time. Then the Arts Council sponsored a Year of Wessex Culture or some such nonsense. Selina and I found ourselves on a dim subcommittee

charged with choosing a logo. I was Mr. Local Literature and she Ms. Fashion and Design. There's nothing like shared dislike to foster intimacy, and the committee chairman was a pain's pain. We got into the habit of adjourning to an Italian restaurant after suffering him, to slander the old fool.

Committee meetings were held in Bristol. One evening I forgot about having to drive home and drank too much. Selina whisked me to her boutique in Park Street to sober me up with black coffee. The upshot being that neither of us got back to Drawbel that night.

Since then there had been four or five discreet meetings at a motel on the far side of Bristol. We'd have a hell of a good time, then ruefully agree it was silly and pointless, and from Selina's standpoint, a menace to her stable future. All very immature for thirty-mumble year olds. On the other hand, there was the chemistry . . . Both of us kept saying it couldn't go on like this; but it and we did.

The most frustrating feeling in the world is to worry about something indefinable.

Days passed and Selina didn't ring back. I fretted: an obvious diagnosis was bruised ego. However, I've lost count of attractive women who have tired of and dropped me; such treatment is not a male monopoly. So it wasn't hurt feelings, sprained pride, or not only that. My malaise might have nothing to do with her.

Imagine trying to grasp soap when your hands are wet. I kept getting flashes of that horrible Sunday morning, a mad montage of images: Mr. Toad partially visible under the tree, Tom Oates's damaged hands after he strove to shift several times his own weight, and Ben's pathetic cap resting on the windowsill. Somewhere in there was a message I could not get straight.

The tragedy had got to me. Belatedly it registered that if I had been one of Mr. Toad's few friends, the reverse was true. Acquaintances far outnumber my friends, and none of them spends much time around Drawbel.

Clearly what I needed was a holiday. My agent pestered me to go sailing in the Grenadines, a berth was going begging on the schooner he'd chartered, all it would cost was the fare to Barbados and a few pounds a day towards food and drink. . . . I was all set until a producer friend offered an obscene amount of money to script-doctor a pilot show, so the vacation fell through. I'm still unsure whether

I am glad or sorry about that. Because if the trip had been made, then Solly might never have confided in me . . .

Three weeks after Ben Basgate's funeral, I was still up there on my hillside, and the camping-gas ran out. The cottage has mains water and drainage but wood fires provide the heating and my cooking stove runs on butane gas.

I keep running out because—this makes weird sense, if only to me—Solly Purchis keeps nagging me about always running out. He has a vulturine air, most appropriately. Solly urged me to keep a reserve cylinder, a spare. When the stove's flame dwindled, I could hook up the reserve and get the empty one refilled.

However, that involved buying a second cylinder. From Solly. He loves money so much that malicious pleasure is gained from refusing to listen to him. Local lore proclaims that he ran one and a half miles after a tourist in a sports car, having given him one penny too much in change for a road map. Solly sputters, "People round here will say anything—that feller went off with *ten pence* of mine." (In Britain a ten-penny coin will not buy the cheapest postage stamp.) "And I only went to the crossroads, never no one and a half miles."

That afternoon I hefted the empty gas cylinder and pushed through the door of the lean-to beside the filling station, gritting my teeth at the prospect of Solly's invariable sermon. He wrong-footed me by accepting the cylinder in silence, before rolling a fresh one out from behind the counter. It's not a store, or doesn't look it, that lean-to. More of a barn and workshop where he repairs garden tools and sharpens mowers.

I was thankful for the truce. Solly Purchis broke it by grumbling, "I suppose you're another as doesn't want a chain saw." He sounded bitterly resigned. One had to smile: such a novel pitch that I filed it away for a possible sketch about an anti-salesman desperate to be turned down.

"That's right," I agreed, poker-faced. "Top marks, Solly."

"Daft, living in a wood and buying logs by the half-ton." His voice trailed away. My logs are bought from Solly Purchis. He decided to plunge for a profit in the hand rather than several, come winter. "Top-of-the-line saw, Japanese, can't say fairer nor that. Cut your own logs, eh? Let you have it at discount, fi—um, two and a half percent off."

For obvious reasons, not many customers chat to Solly. They get out in a hurry while their wallets are still in one piece. But I find

him good value . . . "Not like you, keeping inventory on spec," I teased. He is notorious for selling from catalogs before ordering the goods, sooner than have costly merchandise on his shelves.

"Customer let me down. Speak no ill of the dead, but Mr. Basgate let me down good and proper. Ordered that saw, he did. My own fault, showing a bit of initiative, see. When there was all that fuss about his ruddy tree, him wanting it down, ol' Pete Stuckey swearing he'd take him to court if he touched it . . . I sort of mentioned a chain saw was what he needed.

"Should have kept my trap shut. He wasted hours of my good time, fiddle-faddling over which one to get. Wanted it light. Great paunch on him and arms like wet string, 'course it had to be light. Had to be powerful, though, to get the job done quick. I never asked for a deposit, more fool me. Trusting, I am. Never again."

"You should have been quicker off the mark. In fact, you probably got the poor devil killed," I accused, half seriously. "He got sick of waiting and took an axe to the thing. Might be alive today if you hadn't kept him waiting."

Solly's face darkened. "There wasn't no wait! Chap who delivers my paraffin, his brother works at a wholesale place down Yeovil, he could get me what Basgate wanted. I give him the cash the same day Mr. Basgate made his mind up. My driver brought it two days later. I phoned right away, that was the Saturday. 'I'm busy now,' he says, 'and you don't open Sundays. Tell you what, I shall be in first thing Monday.' Fat chance, with what happened! Now I'm stuck with the ruddy thing."

Follow the impulse to tell Solly Purchis he was the most selfish, quietly despicable character to be found in a long day's march, and he would be indignant. So I confirmed that I could get by without a chain saw and went home.

You will think me remarkably dense, but hours passed before I asked myself why Ben Basgate had gone to all the trouble of chopping down the hated monkey puzzle when by waiting a day he could have let a machine do the work for him. A machine, moreover, that he had ordered for that purpose.

All right, he was Mr. Toad, impatient, volatile, capricious. Yet as Solly Purchis had pointed out, he wasn't a strong man. It had taken time to hack those notches into the trunk, and knowing Ben, his enthusiasm would have wilted after a few strokes and vanished once he began sweating.

I had a drink, and another. Between one sip and the next, all those flashbacks assumed significance as never before.

It was like staring at an overtly senseless pattern, nagged by a hunch that it is nothing of the kind—and then somebody turns the sheet of paper forty-five degrees and you marvel at not having recognised the picture of a faucet or a sleeping cat.

The chat with Solly did that for me.

Doubt over Ben wanting or even needing to take an axe to the monkey puzzle brought a replay of what I had seen. Okay, memory is treacherous, and I tend to embroider and adjust as time passes. It's part of being a writer. But those pictures were branded into my mind by mental and emotional trauma.

Start with Ben's baseball cap, Mr. Toad's headgear. Something made me grimace and wipe my fingers after picking it up off the ground. Now I fancied that I could feel the texture on my skin again: the strip of fabric inside the cap, where the brim met the rest of it, had been faintly greasy. Not sweat, since it wasn't damp, exactly. I had touched hair oil.

Ben was totally bald, so he didn't use anything of that kind. Tom Oates, by contrast, soaked his hair in the stuff.

Another snapshot from that Sunday morning: Tom's hands after he had struggled with the tree and I dragged him away. They were scratched, bleeding, one knuckle raw. Unwarranted damage, I realised, for a few seconds' exposure to abrasive bark and leaves.

Hands . . . I tried to remember what Ben's right hand looked like when I had made that futile check for a pulse. But I was looking away, eyes shut while my fingers rested on his wrist. Ben had been cremated, so there was no way of proving my new certainty that his palm would have been soft, unmarked, free of dirt or blisters.

It was such a weird feeling to see Tom as a killer. As if he had suddenly sprouted an extra head while we played darts at the Huntsman. I *knew* he had killed Ben Basgate and yet part of me couldn't believe that.

He had, though.

He'd killed his uncle and seen the trouble he was in and thought fast, improvised feverishly. Ben's bluster about felling that tree had provided Tom with the seed of his plan.

Just as I and every other local was aware, he knew that in the country, somebody is always watching. Only in cities can you count on being unseen. He had to work outdoors, and though Monks Farm

is remote and secluded, there was always the chance of an early-morning poacher or hiker, a sharp-eyed shepherd or wandering child witnessing what he was up to. At the time they might think nothing of it, but once news of the "accident" got out, they would remember . . .

So he'd jammed the trademark red baseball cap on his head. Anyone sighting him from a distance would assume they were watching the master of the house. If they came right up to the house while he toiled to stage the accident, then he was finished anyway, so a perfunctory disguise had been sufficient . . .

Tom had felled the tree on top of a newly dead man, tossing the axe in beside him at the last moment. Then he'd thrown Ben's cap down and slipped back to his bungalow. It need not have taken more than a quarter of an hour, start to finish—Tom Oates was strong and adept, unlike poor Mr. Toad.

And he'd had an unwitting accomplice in me.

That was not the nastiest insight while I swirled scotch in the glass, unable to drink because I felt so sick. The worst part was that I couldn't prove a thing.

Toward dawn the following day, sleep out of the question, I crammed a few things into an overnight bag and fled to London.

I must have been operating on automatic pilot along the M4 motorway, since I rolled past Hyde Park some hours later with no recollection of events since bumping down the track into Drawbel Valley.

Tom? Tom Oates? He couldn't have. But he did, and you know it. Round and round went the arguments.

Tom had been distraught, that wasn't acting. Or not wholly. And ever since, he had behaved like a man in shell shock. Selina Grace had been right, at the funeral, saying that he loved Ben Basgate. Old farmer Basgate, Ben's dad, had taken orphan Tom in, but Ben was older brother and father figure rolled into one.

The killer had lied and deceived, yet his grief was sincere: because he hadn't planned to do away with Ben and had not wanted to. Somewhere on the Avon-Wiltshire border, zombie-driving over those undulating, ocean-roller hills, it came to me that not being able to make a case against Tom might be a good thing.

Instinct told me that he was a killer but not a murderer. He did not belong in jail and he would punish himself harder than any court could decree.

The only sane explanation was that for some reason he had snapped, lashing out at Ben—hence the skinned knuckle. Lost his temper in a flash (now I retrieved hazy memories of Tom having a hell of a temper as a kid) and been aghast at the result. They'd been out in the garden, Ben had been more than usually exasperating . . .

I could even divine why Tom had covered up for himself. It wasn't fear of prison, but a killer cannot benefit by his crime, and Tom Oates could not bear the prospect of Monks Farm being sold to strangers and barred to him forever.

Ironically, he had not killed for gain—it wasn't in him—but that was the outcome.

In London I crashed with friends and must have proved poor company, constantly preoccupied. Still half incredulous over my conclusions, wanting them to be wrong. I even played devil's advocate, seeking to disprove what I'd worked out.

Was I mistaken about the grease inside Ben's cap? No, the slippery touch on my fingers had revolted me, making me wipe them on my trousers, though I was too shaken at the time to identify what upset me. Not perspiration, but oil or hair cream.

There had been an autopsy on Ben Basgate. Surely the pathologist must have discovered that Ben's death occurred before massive injuries were inflicted, if only by a few minutes? Had he checked Ben's hands for confirmation that a sedentary man had been swinging an axe for a long while? Obviously not. There was no suggestion of foul play—partly due to my input. The pathologist was presented with the victim of a typical country accident, and he had accepted that version.

Very well, what about Solly Purchis? Could I be the only villager told about Ben's purchase of the chain saw? Others might have added two and two, shared doubts with the police, and had them dispelled. A hopeful line—I so wanted to be wrong—but it did not last. I may not have friends in Drawbel (Selina didn't count, she was more than that, and a secret besides), but people do tend to confide in me. It was likely that Solly had tried to get rid of the saw without going into details; probable, indeed, since admitting that he was stuck with the item rather than just having it in stock would invite them to haggle . . .

Turn and twist as I might, it all came back to a certain, tiny impossible to prove.

One . . . accepts things. Ridiculous to exile myself on the strength of intuition and clues perceptible only to me—the material ones no

longer available. To my hosts' barely disguised jubilation, I went home to Drawbel.

Naturally the great bugbear was encountering Tom Oates. Naturally he was just about the first man I met; he came into the post office shop for cigarettes while I was stocking up on groceries. I looked away, mumbling for him to go ahead, I had a stack of stuff to pay for. Tom grunted thanks and was on his way again within a minute.

"Poor chap," sighed Betty Higgs, misunderstanding my flinching from him. "Ghost of hisself, these days. Those shadows round his eyes . . . Gives my hubby the creeps, puts him in mind of them Nazi prison camps, he says."

I couldn't follow that. Betty said, "Well, the weight Tom's lost, clothes hanging off him like a starving man. Never known a fellow grieve so. Tisn't as if his precious uncle did him many favours, but he thought the world of him. What Tom needs is to get married." She regards matrimony as Jewish mothers regard chicken soup.

Gradually I eased back into the village rut. Staying out of Tom's way was easy enough, neither of us being overly gregarious. After a month or so I was having supper in the Huntsman when he appeared. We nodded to each other. I shut my brain down and still contrived to talk soccer to Albert behind the bar.

Studying his reflection in a copper warming pan on the wall, I saw that Mrs. Higgs and her hubby had been exaggerating, but not much. Tom was less trim than stringy, gaunt, and that oily black hair was frosted with grey. When he spoke to me, some casual remark, I answered quite naturally.

There, that wasn't so bad, I thought, walking up to the cottage through twilight trees. Crazily, I felt . . . not obligation or guilt, though there were cobweb-fine tendrils similar to them, but an ambivalent sense of reluctance to let Tom Oates know that I knew. Extraordinarily, embarrassment and self-consciousness outweighed human aversion to a taker of life.

Later that night I heard a car labour up the track, headlights swept across my sitting-room window, and for no good reason, I expected the caller to be Tom.

It was Selina. "I won't come in," she called when I opened the front door. She leaned out of the car window. "What happened to you? I rang here for weeks, then gave up on you."

"Must be your turn, now you know how it feels."

"Touché." She hesitated, then blurted, "I'm getting married."

"Nothing more to be said, then," I replied woodenly.

"You don't seem broken up."

"Do you want me to be?"

"I think I do, isn't that awful." She smiled sheepishly. "You might at least look shattered."

I reached in and touched her hand. "I'm not making much sense to myself these days, not tracking properly. We had lovely times, Sel', and I'll never forget them. Best wishes, goes without saying."

"Thanks. Come to the wedding, promise." The sheepish look returned. She didn't want to add that having known the bridegroom since he was in short pants, and being a casual friend of hers, I would start tongues wagging if I stayed away.

"If I'm in-country, I'll throw rice and toast the pair of you," I replied, thankful for darkness to blur a smile produced by willpower.

That ought to have been the end of it, but these things never end.

When Selina walked up the aisle of St. Mary's, I was better than four thousand miles away, appearing on a TV chat show in New York. The host got my name nearly right and mentioned the latest book twice. In Chicago the name came out right during radio interviews, but one muttonhead forgot to ask about the book and another left listeners with the firm impression that I was peddling a whodunit while I was hyping a historical novel. In New Orleans, final stop, a charming guy got all the facts straight, allowing me to quit while ahead.

Tom Oates has gone fully grey now, his face drawn and furrowed, but the weight is back on and he's a healthier colour. Predictably, Ben left Monks Farm to him. Tom has gone in for organic farming. There's a good market for naturally grown vegetables and Ben's neglect left the fields fallow long enough for chemical fertilizers to leech out. Tom breaks even, which is all he need do, thanks to money inherited along with the estate.

Not long ago I stumbled on the last pointer to his guilt: the motive. I was lecturing at a weekend creative writing school—love hearing myself talk, even without a fee. Over dinner, one student explained that he ran a property development company ("You've heard of Sunday painters, I'm a Sunday scribbler, ha-ha-ha"). Oddly enough, his work, right down to its dense thicket of syntax, read eerily like a less genteel Henry James who knew far too much about bribery over zoning matters.

When I mentioned living at Drawbel, Don Maxwell went into a boisterous pantomime, holding his index fingers towards me in a

cross, vampire-defying fashion. Steadying our bottle of excellent wine, I said mildly, "It's a nice part of the world and they gave up burning witches and eating babies . . . oh, ages ago, hasn't happened since nineteen fifty-five."

Maxwell chuckled inordinately, he was pretty high by then. "Drawbel Valley is written on my heart like Calais on Queen Mary's. Lost a fortune there. Could have made one, leastways, and didn't. Pal o' mine retired there, asked me down. You know how it is, 'If you're ever in the area,' and I stuck his address in the Filofax. Lo and behold, not a month later I went to an auction in Bath; Ben's place was an hour down the road by Jag', so I took him up on the invite.

"Well, he had this farm he didn't know what to do with and the minute I set eyes on it—golf course, I go. Golf course. Knock the house down or extend it, whichever keeps the planners happy, and there you are, clubhouse and pro shop. We shook hands on the deal, and no sooner have I set up legal meetings than the silly beggar snuffs it. Left the place to a man who carried on alarming when I said the king was dead, long live the king, let's make a cartload of money. No sale, no dice, no golf course and trimmings."

So that was the long-ago trigger. Ben had broken the news to Tom one fine Sunday morning, and died in the subsequent explosion.

Maxwell frowned concernedly. "You all right, mate? Look like you had a bad oyster."

But even that, more's the pity, was not the finish.

Not long after dinner with my rich friend I was strolling up Park Street towards Bristol University to collect some research material. And I started assessing, in a chauvinist pig's window-shopping manner, a very short skirt and long legs.

Then she glanced back and it was Selina. Fortunately my face is naturally impassive. I hadn't seen her close-to in several years. It was not that she had aged, but there were elements of hardness and dryness, an aura as much as a look. Makeup more emphatic than before, a discontented pucker to her mouth. "Billy! Are you following me?" Big smile, wet kiss.

Like a fool, effusive through guilt at being disappointed in her, I asked Selina to lunch. "Lovely! I'll just tell my manageress . . ." Truly, it had slipped my mind that her boutique was in Park Street.

Once we had ordered, Selina bumbled that she only looked in at the shop twice a week now and as for me, I was a recluse, what

were the odds against the two of us, etcetera and so forth. Pleased to a borderline nerve-wracking extent.

I don't like the sound of this, whined the base, self-serving swine at the back of my mind. Married women have always been off-limits to me, less from concern over adultery than simple prudence. Affairs of that brand generally end in tears before bedtime; afterwards, actually, and because of.

Cue for tepid, neutral small talk, how was the boutique faring, what were her holiday plans . . . er, this Turner exhibition due to open at Bristol art gallery next month, wouldn't that be a treat.

The smoked salmon couldn't be ignored any longer. As soon as I paused for the first mouthful, Selina jumped in with, "I made a terrible mistake, you know." And it all poured out: husband a morose workaholic, jealous, possessive, yet unwilling to spend much time with her. "Any attention he spares is the wrong kind, checking on me. I have to keep an eye on the business, but every time I come here, there's a scene. He's probably ringing the shop right now; I told Mandy to say I'm out looking at fabrics."

"No need for that," I said firmly. "We're just having lunch, probably won't happen again for years."

"You've always been a friend," said Selina, deaf to that warning shot. "Let's not lose touch again, Billy." Which was rich, considering she had kept me uncertain and distanced in the past, dates refused, calls unanswered as often as returned, and our liaison ended without discussion.

The pattern was depressingly familiar: damned if I did, damned if I didn't, a rat either way. I could snub Selina right now, reminding her that then was then, and she was married now. Or I could stand by her, leading to meetings on the sly. I'd make a pass, it's the way I am, and the overwhelming probability was that Selina would respond, that being the way she was.

Tucking my feet under the chair to avoid knee contact, unplanned or otherwise, I thought about a friend of mine in the Metropolitan Police, a murder investigator.

He says there are two tribes of killers, and there is no point in punishing one sort, because having taken a life, they would kill themselves sooner than do it again. The downside, according to this expert, is that for some of the other tribe, murder gets easier with practice.

"I'm not talking serial killers," he explains, "just your outwardly normal citizen, driven to violence. A few degenerate into being capa-

ble of knifing the bloke who beats 'em to a parking space or compliments their girlfriend on her hairdo."

Tom Oates belonged to the never-again tribe. Ben Basgate told him that the place to which Tom had devoted all his adult life was doomed to become a golf course, and—detonation. A freak event, an unrepeatable anomaly. I was utterly sure of that . . . but not utterly enough to bet my life.

And Selina, as you will have guessed by now, wasn't just any old wife. She was Mrs. Tom Oates.

Even if I didn't make a pass (Tom represented an inhibiting factor powerful enough to discourage that), the danger was that sooner or later I would be tempted to tell Selina why her husband was morose. Then . . . who knows? The best possible prediction was one hell of a mess.

Say I kept my mouth shut and my hands to myself. Selina wanted a male admirer to share her woes and provide implicit assurance that her company was valued. Jealous husbands resent such males. Somebody was bound to see us together, or merely intercept and interpret a look between us, generating gossip until . . .

Until, for the sake of argument, I had an accident.

So—I reflected as duckling in orange sauce was served and she said what a pretty restaurant this was, I'd always known places she would like—the only solution was polite but firm rejection.

"Selina," I began, and she asked, "Yes?" on a rising note. The light was flattering in there, but I noticed the lipstick on her wine-glass and the way her hands looked older than the rest of her. And, heart twisting, I chickened out.

"Just Selina," I lied. "Good to see you again."

From the way she tucked in, the cuisine was good. I couldn't taste the food.

Before the year was out my phone would ring and a familiar voice would ask if I was alone in the cottage because she needed a friendly ear. Or she'd be walking her dog—well after dark, of course—and just happen to drop in. For the first time in my fairly disgraceful life, the prospect was deeply repugnant.

Again I opened my mouth. Again I could not bring myself to tell Selina to grow up and get lost, in whichever order she preferred.

Painted into a corner, I did what any upright country gentleman would have done.

Two or three times a year I go to London for a council of war with my agent, Hal Maitland. Needless get-togethers in this era of phone, fax, and computer, but we eat and drink tax-deductibly, spinning yarns about the good old days (good because they're behind us) when he was a publisher's PR man and I a persecuted hack on the *Daily Excess*. We invariably pronounce a solemn curse on that dreadful rag; and still read the thing every day.

Hal and I were in the Groucho Club a few days after that distressing reunion with Selina. He'd outlined sundry interesting possibilities, then guffawed. "Nearly forgot. . . . There's this idealist at a tiny little West Coast college who thinks you're a loss to academe and wants to do something about it."

"Whereabouts on the West Coast—Dorset, Devon, Cornwall?"

"California, you dolt. Head of English department at this place has gone overboard about *Wails and Whispers*. According to the professor, and she should know, it's a—" Hal squinted in an effort of memory, and recited "'an allegory of Britain's vanishing class structure, at once elegiac and profoundly pessimistic.'"

We looked at each other. *Wails* began as an entry for a BBC-TV drama anthology of social comedy. The Beeb said they didn't want vulgar farce, thanks all the same. Waste not, want not: I turned it into prose, cut the custard pies, added copious French quotations and Latin tags, and Hal found a publisher who believed what agents told him. It sold all of two hundred and fifty copies—fifty of those bought at special rates and entombed in a carton at the back of my garage.

When he'd wiped his eyes, not to mention evidence of Caesar salad off his tie, I asked Hal for more details.

He snorted dismissively. "Left the letter at the office, nearly put it in the round file, my wastebasket. One of those writer-in-residence deals. Nothing there for you, chum. They'll spring for a round-trip air ticket and provide an apartment on campus, but the place is at the back end of nowhere and they wanted you there by the end of next week when whatsit, semester, starts. Far too short notice."

"Wrong," I said. "I'm on my way."





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a **NEW** short story by

DOUG ALLYN

The protagonist of this new story by Michigan author Doug Allyn, Michelle "Mitch" Mitchell, started life as a man in the stories "The Puddle Diver" (AHMM 10/86), "Night of the Grave Dancer" (AHMM 9/88), "Icewater Mansions" (EQMM 1/92), and "The Ten-Pound Parrott" (EQMM 2/92). It was only when Mr. Allyn expanded the story "Icewater Mansions" into a book that he decided a female protagonist would serve his series better, and so we find superimposed on the earlier "Mitch" a completely new character who shares some of the old Mitch's history but otherwise has sprung fresh from the author's pen. . . .

BLACK WATER

by **DOUG ALLYN**

I hate tending bar in the morning. People who drink before noon tend to be surly and sarcastic, especially to a woman. Or so I thought until I hired a male bartender. He quit after three days. And two fistfights. Apparently morning grumps are gender-neutral.

Bartending isn't a trade I chose freely. I inherited The Crow's Nest, a northern Michigan bar/restaurant with a tackle shop attached, from my father. We weren't close, my father and I. I was surprised he left me the Nest, but not surprised its mortgage payments were four months behind. Still, the bar has a terrific view of Huron Harbor, I was ready for a change in my life, and as a single woman with a young son to support, I do what I have to.

Summers are best. I spend most days in the dive shop renting boats and scuba gear while Corey plays on the beach. Sometimes I pick up odd jobs skin diving for things tourists lose on the lake

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bottom. Outboard motors, tackle boxes. And sometimes bodies.

In the fall, the sunbirds fly south, my son returns to his private school, and I work myself half to death trying to ease the ache of missing him. Heck, I'll even tend bar in the mornings.

And sometimes it gets interesting. A Wednesday morning in late fall, a young Hispanic guy in a black leather jacket and faded jeans wandered in. I'm tall for a woman, nearly five-ten, but he was taller, six foot plus. He was probably in his late twenties but didn't look it. He had a pasty, junk-food complexion and a permanent pout hiding behind a scrubby goatee.

He took a seat at the bar, ordered a double shot of Wild Turkey, neat, knocked it back with a single gulp, then ordered another.

"Little early, isn't it?" I said.

He eyed me a moment, and I braced myself for a blast of morning static, but he just shrugged. "Yes, ma'am, I guess it is. Do me a Coke instead. Do you know a guy named Walter McClain?"

"I know who he is," I said, parking a Coke in front of him.

"In a little town like this, everybody knows everybody, right?"

"More or less," I said.

He waited a beat. "So? What can you tell me about him?"

"Not much. In small towns folks kind of look out for each other. I know who Walter is, I even know some of his friends. I don't know you."

"Calderon," he said. "Jimmy Calderon. You?"

"Michelle Mitchell," I said. "People call me Mitch."

"Okay, Mitch, I'm not a friend of Mr. McClain's exactly. More like a . . . distant relative. So tell me what you know about him. Here's something for your trouble." He laid a five on the bar.

I was wearing my morning work scruffs, jeans and a Michigan State sweatshirt. I dug in my pocket, came up with a quarter, and dropped it on his five. "There's a pay phone by the door," I said. "If Walter's in the book, I'm sure he'll be glad to hear from a distant relative." Again I waited for some guff. But he just smiled, slid off his barstool, and sauntered to the phone.

"Thunder Bay Drive?" he said, scanning the book. "Where's that?"

"A mile or so down the lakeshore," I said. "But I imagine he'll be at the plant. McClain Hydraulics."

"Yeah? He own the place, does he?"

"I really couldn't say," I said.

"Right," he nodded. "Small towns. Thanks, Mitch. You been a big help. Maybe after I get settled in you and me can go out some time.

Have dinner, a few laughs. I'll see ya around." And he strolled out, cocky as a goose the day after Christmas.

I walked to the end of the bar and watched him get into a tan Ford Escort with airport rental plates. Odd. He didn't strike me as the tourist type. He gunned the Escort out of the lot like a teenybopper showing off for his buddies. I thought about giving Walt McClain a call, but what would I say? Somebody asked about you? The guy seemed harmless. And then business picked up and I forgot about him.

"What do you mean, he walked on water?" I asked.

"Exactly that," Sheriff Bauer said blandly, leaning on the bar. "Hughie LeBlanc was fishing below the Narrows Dam. A flatlander from Toledo asked him where the bass were bitin', so Hughie tells him to wade out in the channel till he feels the footing slope away, then drop a hook. Only the guy just kept walking, six, seven feet out. Water was barely over his ankles and the channel's at least ten foot deep there. Hughie swears he thought it was the second coming. The guy was walking on water."

"What's the joke, Charlie?" I said. "You'd need stilts to walk more than a foot out from that bank."

"It's no joke, Mitch. There's a car down there, jammed crossways in the channel. The guy from Toledo walked up the trunk and onto the roof and stood there. And old Hughie almost had a heart attack."

"If the car's near the surface, why didn't Hughie spot it?"

"It's black water there. River silt's all roiled up from the dam spillway upstream. I couldn't see the car even after Hughie showed me where it was. Had to poke around with a fishing rod to be sure he wasn't pulling my leg. I need a diver to check out the vehicle and hook up a towline, Mitch, somebody who can work blind. Know anybody who can use a quick seventy-five bucks?"

I glanced around the Nest. There were a few scuba divers in the club, we do a good lakefront trade. But there was no one I'd send into black water. It's an ugly, dangerous job, definitely not for amateurs. "I know a heckuva diver who'll do it for a hundred," I said.

"Thought you might," Charlie said. "Get your gear."

The sun was setting as Charlie Bauer guided his blue sheriff's department Blazer carefully down the embankment to the narrow shelf of the Huron River's floodplain. The wrecker was already there, backed up to the river's edge. Biff Kowalski was stalking around

his huge GMC 7500, stomping his greasy engineer's boots into the soft clay of the bank. Biff's built as solidly as his tow truck and weighs nearly as much. He's usually an even-tempered sort, placid as a side of beef and only slightly brighter. But he knows trucks and winches and rivers. And he looked worried. Which made me worried.

"I don't like this, Charlie," Biff said, scowling at the river. "Current's awful damn fast here. When the car comes outa the muck it's gonna have one helluva lot of water leanin' on it. Maybe enough to burn out my bull-winch or even drag my wrecker in if the car's big enough. I've seen it happen."

"Mitch'll get the make and model while she's down there," Charlie said. "Now stand next to me, give a lady some privacy."

Charlie and Biff stood together with their backs to the Blazer to shield me from the gawkers along the road as I slid out of my jeans and got ready for the river. Charlie's courtesy wasn't really necessary, I was wearing a swimsuit, but the people up on the shoulder wouldn't know that, and Charlie Bauer is a very old-fashioned guy in many ways.

I put on a "woolly bear" suit of long underwear first, then a Farmer John-style foam-neoprene wet suit topped by a hooded vest. The kibitzers up by the road were probably making wisecracks about a woman overdressing, but working in river current is like standing in front of an air conditioner going full blast. Hypothermia can make you stupid and clumsy before you know it, and in black water, stupid and clumsy can kill you quicker than Bonnie and Clyde.

When I stepped out of the vehicle I got a smattering of applause from the peanut gallery along the road, and I gave 'em a quick bow. I popped open the Blazer's tailgate, then hesitated.

Something was odd. I glanced back up at the motley line of spectators and spotted the young Latin I'd met in the Nest the week before. He'd cleaned himself up. He was wearing a dark blazer and tie and he'd lost the ratty goatee. Maybe he really was a relative and Walter took him in. Surprise, surprise.

Back to business. I strapped on a lightweight backpack with a single thirty-minute air tank, opting for maneuverability over dive time. My gear belt held a lifeline on a reel and two flashlights, and I had a helmet light as well, powered by a belt-mounted battery pack. I didn't bother with flippers, I'd be wading down there, not swimming. I double-checked my regulator, then joined Charlie at the river's edge and handed him the end of my lifeline.

"Three hard tugs if I've got trouble. Five if I want you to haul me out. How do you want to work this?"

"You know the drill. Check for a body first. If you find one, come on out and we'll see about getting the spillways closed to get a better look at the scene. If the car's empty, get the make and model and come up for the cable. And Mitch, be careful, okay? Biff's right, last week's rain has the river up and the current's nasty here."

"Right." I waded a few steps downstream, then stepped away from the bank. Even with the water only waist deep, the pressure from the river was a living thing, tugging at my legs, trying to pull me out into the main thrust of the current. I felt a roller-coaster rush of adrenaline. Excitement, tempered by fear. This one would be interesting.

I moved cautiously upstream, groping blindly in the murk ahead until I touched metal. I ran my hands quickly over it, tracing its contours. It was the rounded edge of the trunk. The car was nose-down in the riverbed and I was on the driver's side. I braced myself and pushed hard on the rear fender. Couldn't budge it. Good. It was bedded firmly in the muck. The greatest danger in a dive like this is having the vehicle shift at a bad time and pin you under it. This one was solid as a stone elephant.

Using the car's body to shield myself from the current, I slipped under the surface. Absolute blackness. Not a hint of light. I switched on my helmet lamp, but it only haloed off the turbid silt. Whiteout instead of blackout. No help. I switched it off and worked blind, feeling my way along the side of the car.

Roofline, rear window . . . And then a gap. The driver's door was open. Damn. This would make it trickier. If the car had been closed up, the silt would have settled out of the water inside it and I could have checked the interior with a light. As it was, the only way to check for a body in there was by touch. I felt an icy chill that had nothing to do with the river current.

There was no other way. Grasping the steering wheel with my left hand, I quickly ran my right hand over the front seat, the ceiling, the dashboard, the floor. Nothing. I inched farther inside, reached around the front seat and groped blindly in the back. I began on the ceiling, slid my hand across until I felt the backseat, then down—something spongy moved beneath my hand!

I recoiled, banging the back of my head against the front door frame. Damn! My eyes felt like they were pressed against the Lexan lens of my face mask. But there was nothing to see. Black water. I

tried to remember what . . . whatever I'd touched felt like. Cloth. A sleeve perhaps? With an arm in it? I wasn't sure.

Dammit, dammit, dammit. I couldn't even check my watch to find out how long I'd been down. Not long enough. Nowhere near thirty minutes. I had no excuse to surface. Pity. I had a memory flash of a comedian . . . George Carlin? Talking about being on an airplane and seeing flames coming out of an engine. But not telling the stewardess about it. Because he'd rather die than look like a schmuck.

It was funny because it was true. And the truth was, frightened or not, I wasn't about to surface and tell Sheriff Bauer or Biff that there *might* be a body in this godforsaken car. Neither one would say anything. But they'd think it. Next time, get a man for the job.

I swallowed hard and reached into the rear passenger area. And brushed against the cloth. And felt it give. Too late to back off now. I squeezed, gently at first. Then harder. The fabric pinched together. Not a sleeve, or a coat . . . The material was too coarse. More like . . . Hell, it was carpet. The carpeting from the rear floor had bubbled up and I was holding a piece of it.

I ran my hand quickly over it, far enough to know there were no more surprises. And then I backed out and surfaced, letting Charlie pull me close enough to the bank to stand.

I spat out my mouthpiece. "Nobody home. Can't tell what kind of a car it is, can't see an inch. But I could reach clear across to the far door, so it must be a compact. Want me to hook it up?"

"You want a break first? You sound a little shaky."

"It's cold down there," I said curtly. Biff handed me the hook on the end of the cable and reeled a few feet off the winch. I replaced my mouthpiece, stepped off the bank, and slid back down into the blackness. I felt along the car till I found the rear wheel, then beyond it to the frame. I looped the line around a solid cross member, hooked up, then backed out and surfaced again. Charlie gave me a hand up.

"You okay?"

I nodded, not trusting my voice yet. Biff already had the wrecker's winch cranking, the big truck rocking on its tandem wheels as the reel drew the steel cable taut. It hesitated a minute when it hit dead level, then with a deep, liquid gurgle the river muck released its hold and the car began inching slowly out of the dark and up the bank. When the rear wheels crawled clear of the river and I was sure I wouldn't have to go back down, I trudged over to Charlie's Blazer and shed my air tank and tool belt. And took a moment to

think about how ugly it had been to feel that carpet. And how good it felt not to quit. A little private "attagirl." The best kind.

When I turned back, the car was already two thirds clear of the river. Coffee-colored water gushed out of the open door and river silt slid down the roof and the sides.

The steel cable had crushed part of the bumper assembly, popping the trunk. But the car was easily recognizable. And familiar. It was an airport rental Ford Escort. Tan.

Charlie was checking the license plate against his clipboard. "Gotcha," he said.

"Were you looking for this one?" I asked.

"It was on the hot sheet," he nodded. "Guy took it on a three-day rental at the airport ten days ago."

"A young guy? Latin?" I asked.

He glanced at the sheet, then at me. "Yeah. Name was Calderon. What are you, a witch?"

"Sometimes," I said. "But not this time. I met him last week. In fact, if you'd like to talk to him, he was standing with the rubberneckers up on—there. See the tall guy on the end, the one in the blue sports jacket? That's him."

"No kidding?" Charlie said. "Hey! Excuse me, you, the guy on the end? Could you come down here a minute, please?"

Calderon hesitated, then stepped over the railing and clambered down the bank. He was carrying a flight bag, and as he entered the ring of light from the wrecker's halogen roof rack I knew I was mistaken. There was a resemblance, but it wasn't the same man. He was older, more solidly built. And better looking.

"My diver here thinks there's a chance you know something about this car," Charlie said.

"I don't understand," Calderon said.

"Sorry, my mistake," I put in. "From a distance you looked a lot like the guy who rented this car."

"Jimmy Calderon? Is this his car?"

"A James Calderon rented it," Charlie nodded. "You know him?"

"I'm Ray Calderon. Jimmy's my brother," he said, stalking over to the dripping car. "How did it get in the river?"

"I was hoping you could tell us," Charlie said.

"No, I don't know anything about this. I just flew in. I told the airport cabby to take me to your office, but as we drove past he said it looked like the whole department was here, so we stopped."

"Why were you looking for me?" Charlie asked.

"My brother came here on—business, last week. He was supposed to stay in touch. When he didn't, I got worried."

"Where are you from, Mr. Calderon?" Charlie asked.

"Virginia. Norfolk. I got out of the navy a few months ago."

"A long way to come," Charlie said. "Why didn't you just phone?"

Calderon hesitated a moment, then shrugged. "Because if Jimmy was all right I didn't want to cause any fuss."

"You mean because your brother's on parole," Charlie said. "I ran a check on him when his car went overdue. Armed robbery, wasn't it?"

"It sounds worse than it was," Calderon said evenly. "He was young, he made some mistakes. He's paid for them."

"Not entirely, or he wouldn't still be on parole. Let me ask you a question, Mr. Calderon, straight up. What are the chances your brother ditched this car on a whim and skipped?"

"No way," Calderon said positively. "He only had six months of parole left and he had a job. He had no reason to run."

"He didn't have permission to leave Virginia either, but he did."

"Charlie?" Biff interrupted. "I'm hooked up and ready to haul 'er to the yard. You want the stuff in the trunk?"

"What stuff?"

"Luggage," Biff said. "A couple suitcases."

"Suitcases?" Charlie said.

"They're Jimmy's all right," Ray Calderon said grimly, sorting quickly through the sodden clothing. "This is a picture of my—our mother," he said, handing a photograph in a K mart frame to Charlie. "You still think he dumped the car and took off? Without his clothes?"

"Probably not," Charlie said honestly. "On the other hand, I can't say I like the alternative any better."

"What do you mean?"

"We had a hard rain most of last week, Mr. Calderon, and the riverbank's so muddied up we can't be sure where the car went in. See that area up there, just before the bridge? It's a blind curve, a nasty one. People miss it sometimes, mostly out-of-towners who don't know it's there. It's especially difficult to see in the rain. And with the bank muddy, a car'd go down it like a toboggan, hit the river, and the current would carry it to just about the point where we hauled it out."

"And you think my brother missed a curve in the dark and wound up in the river?"

"No sir, I'm not saying that. We don't know what occurred yet. I just want you to be aware of the possibility."

"I see." Calderon nodded. He walked away from us to the river's edge, staring out into the dark, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, his shoulders hunched slightly against the pain.

"But if . . . if that's what happened, where's the body?"

"The driver's side door was open," I said reluctantly.

"But dammit, Jimmy's a strong swimmer and that car was only a few feet from the bank."

"That's where it came to rest," Charlie said. "It would have gone in about fifty yards upstream. Maybe he was injured in the crash, or simply couldn't find the bank in the rain."

"Maybe," Calderon said. "Where would a body end up, if it went into the water here?"

"The river empties into Lake Huron about four hundred yards downstream," I said. "The thrust of the current continues more than a mile offshore. With the water this high, it might be closer to two miles."

"Bodies surface after a day or so," Calderon said, his voice barely audible. "Wouldn't someone have found it?"

"In the summer, maybe," Charlie said, "when we have a lot of boaters. But this time of year, especially with all the rain this past week, it's quite possible it wouldn't be seen. We can start an air search tomorrow, but it's a big lake out there, Mr. Calderon, a hundred and fifty miles to the Canadian shore. And he might not be on the surface now. Meanwhile, why don't we consider the other possibilities."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, but maybe you do. Why did your brother come up here to Huron Harbor?"

"It was—personal. He was—he was trying to locate his father."

"His father?" I said, surprised.

"That's right," Calderon said, looking at me for the first time. "We're only half brothers, Jimmy and me, same mother, different fathers. Jimmy never had any contact with his real father. He came up here to find him."

"Who's his father?" Charlie asked.

"A man named Walter McClain."

"Then he made a trip for nothing," Charlie said. "The only Walter McClain I know's in his early thirties."

"He did ask about Walter," I put in.

"You talked to my brother?" Calderon asked, surprised. "When?"

"Last Wednesday," I said, glancing at Charlie for an okay. "I own a little bar/restaurant and he stopped in for . . . information, mostly. I told him he'd probably find Walter at the plant. And he drove off in that direction when he left."

"Well, we can't do any more here tonight," Charlie said. "Maybe we can get a line on his movements. The McClain place is on the way back to the station anyway. Where can I contact you, Mr. Calderon?"

"No place, I mean, I'm not staying anywhere yet. The cabby dropped me here. Can I catch a ride into town with you?"

"No problem," Charlie said. "Climb aboard. Passenger side, please. Mitch needs the backseat to change."

"That was a nice bit of diving you did back there," Calderon said over his shoulder without turning his head. He was riding shotgun in Charlie Bauer's county Blazer. I was in the backseat. I'd shucked my diving gear and climbed back into faded jeans and a sweatshirt.

"Just another day at the office," I said.

"You learn in the military?"

"No, I grew up underwater. My dad owned the Crow's Nest and rented boats and diving gear. He taught me. After high school I got a job with Exxon out on the Texas gulf for a while, doing underwater maintenance off the oil platforms."

"I didn't know they hired women for that kind of work."

"They don't hire women," I said evenly. "They hire divers who can do the job. The money was good, but the platforms aren't much of a life. My son was in boarding school, and I could only see him on weekends. So we moved back up here."

"I can see why," Calderon said absently, "it's beautiful country, what I've seen of it."

"What did you do in the navy, Mr. Calderon?" Charlie asked.

"Flight crew. The last few years I worked in an air/sea rescue squadron out of Norfolk. Which means I'm aware of the odds against recovering my brother's . . . body. If he went into that river."

And that chilled the conversation until we pulled into the long circular drive of the McClain estate. It's a Tudor-style manor, three stories, twenty rooms or so, overlooking the north shore of Thunder Bay. In Detroit or Grosse Pointe it would have been surrounded by

spear-tipped steel fencing, but up here neighbors are all you need.

I expected Charlie to tell us to wait in the car, but he didn't. Calderon flanked him while he rang the buzzer. Chimes tinkled like Waterford crystal somewhere within.

The door was opened by an over-the-hill surfer, or at least that was my first impression. He was tall, tanned, a bodybuilder type, mid-fortyish with a shoulder-length mane of dark, tousled hair. He was wearing a white cable-knit sweater, white slacks, and deck shoes, no socks. No underwear either unless I was greatly mistaken. His sleepy gray eyes had all the intensity and intelligence of a cocker spaniel.

"Yes?"

"I'm Sheriff Bauer, to see Mr. McClain? I called ahead."

"Of course, please come in."

We followed the surfer down a tiled entry hall into a modest-sized living room, comfortably furnished with wine-toned leather sofas and a half-dozen chairs. The McClain family was all there, what there is of it. Walter, a pudgy jock-gone-to-seed with thinning sandy hair—he was wearing the vest and dress pants of a business suit, a *Wall Street Journal* on his lap. A solid citizen. But I noticed his fingertips were raw, nails chewed to the quick.

His wife, Hannah, stood behind his chair, wary as a doe in a rainstorm. She was a rangy blond stunner, half a head taller than Walter, a local girl, nee Luebner. Her family were woodcutters, cedar savages, a ragtag army of kids and dogs and pickup trucks and chain saws. I had vague memories of her from high school, a quiet girl, self-conscious about her diction, I think. But she got good grades and made the state finals as a distance runner. When she married Walter, the local gentry clucked that he'd married beneath himself. Personally, I thought he'd scored a terrific catch. I wasn't so sure she had.

She was dressed casually in a teal designer sweater, slacks, and pumps, yet seemed uncomfortable, as if she feared Charlie'd come to haul her back to Shacketown where she belonged. Or maybe she hoped he would.

Walter's mother, Audrey McClain, was in her wheelchair near the fire. She was tiny, and frail as smoke, probably fiftyish but her debility made her seem older. Her gleaming platinum hair contrasted with a simple blouse of raw silk, black, with matching skirt, a string of pearls at her throat.

Her finely sculpted face must have been truly lovely once. To me she still was. Her shoulders were humped from arthritis that forced her to cock her head when she looked at you, like a kitten listening. Her eyes were catlike too, curious and alert. Her body was bent, but her spirit was unbroken. Rumor said she had a tongue like a horsewhip when crossed. I didn't doubt it.

"So, Charlie," she said. "Come to haul me away for my sins at last, have you?"

"No, ma'am, there's been an accident. A young fella's gone missing. I'm trying to trace his movements hoping to get a line on him."

"Who's missing?" Walter frowned. "And why come here?"

"His name's James Calderon. He's this gentleman's brother," Charlie added nodding at Ray. "Thing is, he apparently came to town looking for you, Walt. May have gone out to the plant. Did you talk to him? Would have been last Wednesday, most likely."

"Wednesday?" Walter blinked uneasily, glancing at his mother. "Yes, I talked to him a few minutes. He didn't make much sense. Said something about being my brother, but one of the punch presses was down on the shop floor and I was busy as hell. Told him to take a walk, I didn't have time for games. He got a little pushy, so my Uncle Gordon showed him out. That was about it."

"He said he was your brother and you didn't take time to talk to him?" Charlie said, his tone neutral.

"What was I supposed to do? Let fifty guys stand around at ten bucks an hour while I shoot the breeze with some clown I never heard of? It was all a crock anyway. He was looking for a handout."

"Actually he wasn't," Audrey said, cocking her head to gauge Charlie's reaction. "Or at least he didn't ask me for anything. He just wanted to meet his father."

"He came here to the house?" Charlie asked. "When was that, Mrs. McClain?"

"Wednesday afternoon, around two, I think. He apparently got our address out of the phone book."

"Mother," Walter began, but she cut him off with a wave.

"Don't lecture me, Walter. I know I shouldn't have let him in, but it was Ross's day off and I was bored. And he seemed harmless enough."

"What happened?" Charlie prompted.

"At first he said he was a friend of Walter's from out of town, which I knew wasn't true. He was far too interesting to be a friend of Walter's. He asked a few questions about the family, to confirm

things, I suppose, and then he told me straight out that he was Wally's half brother. That my late husband had an affair with his mother, and he was the result. He even had pictures."

"What kind of pictures?" Charlie asked.

"Nothing pornographic," Audrey said drily. "Just snapshots of Walter and . . . a very pretty young woman, dark eyes, and dark hair. Walter always had excellent taste. One picture was a group shot with a young boy, this gentleman here, unless I'm greatly mistaken."

Calderon nodded, but said nothing.

"When I explained that Walter senior died in Viet Nam, he . . . Well, he was very disappointed, naturally. We talked awhile, had a drink or two, and then Megan Lundy stopped by to talk about the Arts Council scholarships. And so I . . . gave Mr. Calderon some money, and he left."

"You gave him money?" Walter echoed.

"Not a lot of money dear, a few hundred. His airfare, more or less. He'd come a long way for nothing. I felt it was the least I could do. We can afford it. Or rather *I* can," she added pointedly.

"That's not true," Ray Calderon said slowly.

"Mr. Calderon," Charlie began, "I know this isn't easy for you, but—"

"Easy's not the issue," Calderon said coolly. "I don't know how much of what this nice lady just told us is true, but I know the last part isn't. Her husband didn't die in Viet Nam. He was never there and Jimmy knew it. What's going on here, lady? What are you trying to hide?"

"I've heard about enough of this," Walter said, rising, his face flushing. "Charlie, you're out of line bringing this man to my home. I want him gone, now. If you've got any more questions, call my office during business hours. Or talk to my attorney. Is that clear? Ross, would you see these *people* out, please."

"There's no need to be unpleasant, Walter," Audrey McClain said sharply. "And since I'm the only one who can help, why don't you and Hannah go on to your Chamber of Commerce meeting? I'll be fine," she said, waving off his objections. "If Charlie hauls out a rubber hose I'll have Ross throw him out. Or try. It might be fun to watch. You go on. I'll talk to you later."

"Your mom's right, Wally," Hannah McClain said suddenly, speaking for the first time. "We're already late, and you're supposed to talk about the plant expansion. We'd better go."

Walter hesitated, whipsawed between the two women in his life. "All right," he said reluctantly. "But dammit, Charlie, keep this short, understand? Mom's been known to overestimate her stamina." He turned and stalked out without another word. Hannah and Audrey exchanged a wry glance of shared amusement and irritation. And then Hannah followed her husband out.

"Well," Audrey said, taking a deep breath, "Ross, I think I'd like a whiskey sour. Anyone else? Coffee? Tea? Something to eat, perhaps?" No one spoke. "Then just get mine please, Ross. And Ross? Take your time. And knock before you enter, dear." The weightlifter nodded mutely and trudged off. He left the door ajar. Charlie closed it.

"Please sit down, all of you," Audrey said. "Looking up at you is giving me a stiff neck."

"Mrs. McClain, perhaps tomorrow would be better," Charlie said.

"No, I'd like to get this over with. To help this young man if I can. None of this is his fault, and he's quite right, Walter didn't die in Viet Nam. Wally's a bit touchy on the subject of his father, as you may have gathered. It was only a minor scandal back then, lots of young men deserted to avoid the war. And later, when my father-in-law told people Walter died in Viet Nam, no one bothered to contradict him. Or dared to. Old Harvey was a formidable man. By now I imagine most people believe it actually happened. Wally may half believe it himself. But . . . you're right, Mr. Calderon," she said, swiveling her chair to face him. "Your brother didn't buy the family cover story. He even showed me a photostat of an army warrant. Which surprised me. I thought President Carter's amnesty took care of all that."

"The amnesty was for draft resisters," Calderon said. "Not deserters. Or thieves."

"Thieves?" Charlie echoed.

"There was a—misunderstanding about some money Walter took from his unit when he left," Audrey sighed. "Not much, a few thousand. And I believe a man was injured in a fight over it. My father-in-law offered to repay the money when the military police made inquiries. I was quite ill at the time. I don't know if he actually did so."

"It wouldn't have mattered, ma'am," Calderon said grimly. "It wasn't just the money. When Captain McClain got orders for Viet Nam, he skipped out with his outfit's payroll. A sergeant tried to

stop him and got shot for his trouble. Nearly died. The army would still like to talk to your husband about it."

"Then they'll need a . . . channeler? Is that the word?" Audrey said. "Walter may not have died in Viet Nam, but he is dead. My late father-in-law tried very hard to locate him after the amnesty. Police, detectives, attorneys, the works. They found exactly nothing. In the end we took legal action to have Walter declared dead so Walter junior could inherit the business. And it was not a step we took lightly."

"Having him declared dead may have simplified your situation," Calderon said. "It wouldn't matter to the military."

"Your brother said something along those lines," Audrey said, craning her neck to see him better. "He thought Walter came back here all those years ago. Is that what your mother told him?"

"That's right."

"Well, she may have thought so, but it simply wasn't true. Wherever he ran to, it wasn't here. He went off to the army and never came home. Like so many others."

"There's a big difference between those others and your husband, Mrs. McClain," Calderon said. "He was never in combat. Why are you so sure he's dead?"

"Because a small army of detectives found no trace of him. But also because of the money," she said. "Walter was never any good with money. Never had to be. I wasn't surprised when the investigators told me he took some. He probably meant to pay it back. The family could afford it. The point is, the few thousand he took wouldn't have lasted him for long. But he never asked for more. We've never heard from him again. Ever."

"Or so you say, ma'am. No offense, but he *was* your husband, after all."

"You seem like an astute young man," Audrey said, her voice chilling a bit. "Your brother showed me a picture of your mother. She was lovely. If you were Walter, would you have chosen to run off with her? Or come home to this?" she said, indicating herself and the chair with a flutter of her hand.

"But he . . . didn't run off with my mother."

"Well, perhaps we made the same mistake, she and I. We were apparently both pregnant when he left us, and I can tell you from my experience that Walter, like most men, had no patience with pregnancy. Perhaps he replaced your mother as she replaced me. Who can say? And I'm afraid that's really all I can tell you, Mr.

Calderon. Your brother left here late in the afternoon. It was raining hard, he was a bit upset, and we'd . . . well, we'd had several brandies together, drowning our sorrows. Perhaps I shouldn't have let him go. But I was more than a little upset myself. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too, ma'am," Calderon said. "For all of it. Thanks for . . . well, for telling me."

"That's quite all right," Mrs. McClain said, "but if you don't mind, I'm a bit tired now."

"Of course," Charlie said, rising. "We'll see ourselves out." He strode quickly to her chair, bent down, and gave her a peck on the forehead. "If you think of anything else that might help, anything at all, please give me a call."

She nodded. "I will, dear. You take care. Miss?" she said suddenly, turning to me. "You're Shannon Mitchell's daughter, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said, surprised that she knew.

"I wonder . . . could you stay a minute? I'd like to talk to you. Please."

"I don't know," I said, glancing at Charlie for advice, but his square, freckled face was professionally neutral, unreadable. As usual.

"I'll see that she gets home, Charles, you go ahead," she said, waving him off. A woman used to being obeyed. Charlie nodded and walked out, pointedly motioning Calderon ahead of him. Ross the surfer came in a moment later, carrying a whiskey sour on a small silver tray.

"Thank you, dear," she said, taking the glass, sipping the liquor greedily. "Now, would you please bring one of the cars around and wait out front? Miss Mitchell will need a lift into town shortly."

Ross glanced at me a moment, then nodded and stalked off, closing the door after him.

"I knew your father," she said, swiveling her chair to face me, cocking her head with that kittenish tilt to look me over. "You favor him a bit, tall and dark. Much prettier, of course, though he was no slouch in that department. Before my accident I used to sail a lot. I bought equipment from him and he gave me a few pointers. Though not the sort of pointers he gave a good many local girls. A pity."

Surprise must have shown in my face.

"Oh, don't look so shocked. At my age, I only regret the fun things I missed doing. Like your father. I understand you inherited his business. Are you with the sheriff's department too?"

"No, I just dive for them occasionally."

"Good, then there'll be no conflict of interest if I hire you to do a small job for me."

"What kind of a job?"

"Let's call it babysitting, of a sort. Mr. Calderon is upset and he'll be making inquiries. As an outsider, he's liable to blunder around upsetting people. Frankly, I'd like to minimize any fuss, for my son's sake. I sympathize with Mr. Calderon, of course, but I have my own family to think of. So I'd like you to help him with his inquiries, but try to see that he's as . . . discreet as possible. You understand, I'm sure."

"I think so," I said. "You want to pay me to keep Calderon discreet. And I take it I'm supposed to be discreet too?"

She hesitated, trying to read my face.

"Actually," I said, "I think I can save you some money, Mrs. McClain. I'll help Calderon if he needs it because, as you said, none of this is his fault. And I won't carry tales about what was said here because it's no one else's business, including mine. What's more, it won't cost you a dime."

"My, my," she said slowly, with a mischievous grin. "I believe I've pushed one of your hot buttons, as the kids say. I meant no offense, Miss Mitchell."

"None taken," I said. "Was there anything else?"

"Yes. Please come and see me again, just to talk. The only visitors I get nowadays are old friends, and I mean *old* friends, or people with their hands out. I could use a new friend."

"Can't we all," I said.

"She's at least half crazy, you know," Ross said. We were in a Lincoln Town Car, gliding sedately along the lakeshore drive. I looked him over as he spoke. Up close, I revised my first impression of him. He was older than I thought, late fortyish, maybe more. His dark hair had the faint plum highlights of a rinse, and the skin around his eyes was a tad too taut across his cheekbones. Cosmetic surgery? He'd be the type, I suppose.

It must be grim to be in the paid-companion business and start noticing crow's-feet and gray hairs. Heck, it's pretty grim even if you're not.

"She was sharp tonight, on top of things," he continued, keeping his eyes on the road. "But on her bad days she can be a handful. Did she try to hire you for something or other?"

I glanced at him without answering.

"I'm just trying to do my job, lady," he said, giving me a flash of too-perfect teeth in a practiced, professional grin. "Sometimes it includes being nosy."

"And what is your job, exactly?"

"Rent-a-pal," he said frankly. "I help her in and out of her chair, cook for her, try to keep her out of trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"All kinds. On her bad days she orders things over the phone, from mink coats to phony gold stocks, and then forgets about it. She gets agitated and wants to drive and I have to jolly her out of it before she kills somebody."

"She can drive?"

"Sure. She's got a little modified van minus a driver's seat so she can control it from her chair. She handles it all right, when she's herself. But on her bad days . . ."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Just trying to avoid problems. She gets upset when she forgets things and I hate to see her like that. I think this Calderon business upset her more than she let on. It'd be better if he didn't come around again. A lot better."

"Better for whom?" I asked.

"For Audrey. I really do like her, you know. She can be a real trip to be around. But if she's hired you for anything, you'd better clear it with Wally or me if you expect to get paid. Next time you see her, she may not remember who you are. Or even who she is."

"I see," I said, considering it.

"So, did she offer you some kind of a job?" he asked.

"Is Ross your first name or your last?" I asked.

He glanced at me a moment, reading my eyes. "It's Ross," he said, with a vacant smile. "Just Ross."

Charlie Bauer's county Blazer was parked in The Crow's Nest lot when Ross dropped me off. Charlie and Ray Calderon were alone at a corner table. Charlie, bear-sized in his brown uniform jacket, was stolidly munching one of our cheeseburger deluxes, a two-fisted dinner even with paws the size of Charlie's. Calderon was sipping a straight whiskey, not his first, judging from the flush of his jaw. Maybe serious drinking ran in the family.

"Hi," I said, easing down across from Charlie. "Any news?"

"Mr. Calderon here made a call, but nobody back home had heard from his brother, so I contacted the Coast Guard. We'll start an air

search of the lake tomorrow. How much area do you figure we should cover?"

"That's hard to say," I said, hesitant to speak openly with Calderon there.

"It's all right," Ray said as though he'd read my mind. "I know the drill. How far could a body drift in ten days?"

"The river current's thrust is still palpable a good two miles from the mouth," I explained. "Might be farther with all the rain we've had. Deep water's temperature is roughly forty degrees and bodies rise fairly quickly, say twenty-four to forty-eight hours. The prevailing wind's been from the northeast the past week, so the floater—excuse me, the body, would drift south once it surfaced. I doubt it could be more than five miles out, so an air search in an eight-mile arc from the river mouth should do it. Plus a ground search of the South Point shoreline."

"You're assuming the torso's intact," Calderon said quietly. "If it's been punctured, the body may already have sunk. What about scavengers, gulls, or fish?"

"The Great Lakes don't have any scavenger fish that work on the surface, at least no large ones. Gulls might attack a fl—"

"Go ahead and call it a floater," Calderon snapped. "I'm familiar with the term."

"Sorry, I'm just trying . . . In any case, your brother was wearing a leather jacket when I saw him. It wasn't in the car, so if he was wearing it when he went in, it would protect his upper body from gulls. I think there's a good chance the body's still afloat, possibly already ashore."

"Wouldn't somebody have found it if it had washed up?"

"Maybe not. Tourist season's over, and a lot of the houses along South Point are summer homes."

"I see. And if the body's already sunk?"

I glanced at Charlie, not wanting to say it.

"If that's the case, the chances of a recovery drop off pretty sharply," Charlie said calmly. "In the spring, when the ice breaks up, it might be carried ashore. But to be absolutely frank with you, Mr. Calderon, if we don't recover the body in the next few days, it's quite possible we may never find it. Of course, it's also possible it isn't in the lake at all."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, so far we've assumed the worst. We find the car in the river, suitcases in the trunk. Granted, it looks bad. But suppose your

brother made it out of the car okay? He'd been drinking, he'd just had a big disappointment, in effect he'd lost his father for the second time. Maybe he just decided the hell with it all and took off. Young guys do that sometimes."

"No," Calderon said softly. "He didn't run off. I think Jimmy's dead. I'm almost certain of it."

"Why do you say that?" Charlie asked.

"I know it here," Calderon said, tapping his heart. "I've felt it for days. We were very close as kids. My mom remarried a few years after Jimmy was born. A sailor. So we grew up as navy brats, always on the move. All we had was each other. Then I went in the service and Jimmy . . . I think I need to take a walk," he said abruptly, rising, his eyes misty. "Is there a motel around here?"

"A couple," Charlie said. "Harbor Inn's the best, half mile or so down the shore. I'll be glad to drop you."

"No, I'll find it. You finish your dinner. There is one thing, though. The air search? I'd like to go along. I'm not an amateur. I won't get in the way."

"I can ask," Charlie said. "Can't guarantee anything. It'll be up to the Coast Guard pilot."

"Thanks," Calderon said. "For everything. You too, ma'am. And I'm sorry if I've seemed rude."

"No problem," I said.

"Right. I'll be at that motel if anything . . . Well, you know." He turned and walked out without a backward glance. And I'm human. I couldn't help noticing how well he carried himself, and the way his shoulders moved . . . Charlie was watching me.

"So," I said, meeting his gaze. "Do you think he's right? The feeling he's got about his brother, I mean?"

"Hard to say," Charlie said. "I've never experienced it myself, but I've run into it a few times over the years. People call the station, ask us to check on somebody, usually a parent, because they've had a dream or a bad feeling something's happened to them."

"And?" I prodded. "How does it turn out?"

Charlie shrugged. "It's only happened a few times. It's not like I've done a big scientific study or anything."

"And you're ducking the question. Are they ever right?"

"They're always right," he said sourly, pushing his plate aside. "Every damned time."

* * *

Calderon went up with the Coast Guard chopper the next day. For nearly ten hours they crisscrossed an imaginary grid over roughly eighty square miles of open water. The weather was ideal for a search, a brassy, beautiful October day, light wind, waves less than a foot, visibility almost perfect. Charlie buzzed me at four to tell me they'd struck out completely, both in the air and the ground search along the shore, but when Calderon wandered into the Nest a little after seven that night, there was no disappointment in his face. Or much of anything else. He was a closed book, but one that might be interesting to read.

He was dressed semiformal for this part of the country, jeans with a jacket and tie. He took the same corner table he and Charlie had shared the night before, and I wandered over.

"Hi," I said. "Charlie told me how the search went. I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "Maybe no news is good news. Can I buy you a drink?"

"No, thanks," I said, sitting down across the table from him. "But I'm a good listener."

"I don't need a shoulder to cry on," he said. "At least, not yet. I could use a little consultation though, if you wouldn't mind?"

"Not at all. How can I help?"

"The Coast Guard pilot told me that this time of year, with the weather and water temperature so cold, a floater will stay on the surface for quite a while. Sometimes weeks."

I nodded. "Sometimes."

"Well, you couldn't ask for a better look than we had up there today, so I've got to assume that either the body's gone down, or . . . that maybe it's somewhere else."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, we don't know for a fact that my brother was in the car when it went in. The sheriff said there was no blood or interior damage to indicate he was injured. Maybe there's some other explanation."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Are you a gambler, Miss Mitchell?"

"Call me Mitch," I said. "And I've been known to drop a few bucks at poker, why?"

"Then you know about probabilities. The odds. My little brother comes to a town he's never been in before, doesn't know a soul. He makes some inquiries about a guy who supposedly died umpteen years ago. And then, poof, he's gone," he said, snapping his fingers.

"Disappears, just like that. What do you figure the odds are that it's a coincidence?"

"I couldn't say," I said carefully. "But that might be exactly what it is."

"An accident?" he said. "That's what you think? Okay, where's the body?"

"Mr. Calderon, people do disappear in the big lake. Someone . . . very close to me went through the ice last year. We never found him."

"But they usually turn up, right? More often than not?"

"More often than not, yes."

"Then all I'm saying is, for Jimmy to die accidentally only a few hours after he arrived, and for his body to disappear too, strikes me as one heckuva long shot."

"Long shots come in sometimes."

"Sometimes the turtle beats the rabbit"—he nodded—"but you don't bet that way. Or at least I don't. Plus, I've been thinking about what Mrs. McClain told us last night. She lied to us until I called her on it, you know. And now I wonder how much of the rest of it was true."

"About what?"

"I don't know," he said, exasperated. "I'm not saying she's an archcriminal, but her health's obviously pretty shaky. Maybe her memory is too. Maybe she forgot something."

"Ross, her butler or whatever he is, says she has good and bad days," I conceded. "He also suggested strongly that we stay away from her. And maybe he's right. She seems in rough shape."

"Fair enough, but what about the lady she mentioned, the one who stopped by?"

"Megan Lundy?"

"Right. Do you know her?"

"To say hello to. She's an artist, teaches at the local community college."

"I'd like to talk to her. But since she doesn't know me from Adam, I wonder, could you give her a call and set it up?"

"Sure. I'll come along if you like."

"I'd appreciate that. It might help."

"Not at all. But just so we understand each other, Mrs. McClain offered to pay me to be your . . . chaperone, I suppose. She's afraid you might embarrass her family."

"I've nothing against them. Hell, in a way we're related. How much is she paying you?"

"Nothing. I turned her down."

"You turned her down? Then why are you helping me?"

"I turned down the money," I said. "I didn't say I didn't want the job."

Megan Lundy's home was only a mile or so up the shore from the McClains'. It was a converted summer retreat, an unremarkable two-story slate-gray clapboard salt-box with chocolate eaves and shutters. It was flanked by eyeless vacation cabins, closed for the season from the look of them.

I rang the buzzer and a voice from above yelled at us to come around back.

A broad redwood deck with balustered railings had been built out from the rear of the house at the second-story level to overlook the rocky beach and the bay. We climbed an ornate spiral stairway up to the deck. And stepped into Wonderland.

A barefoot young woman with stringy auburn hair was stirring an empty pot on a prop kitchen stove at the far corner of the deck. Her threadbare flannel bathrobe was open to the waist, revealing her breasts and the silky curve of her abdomen. She was twentyish, and seven months pregnant. And she was in chains.

Black iron manacles encircled her wrists and a heavy chain draped from them to the deck. She glanced up as Ray stepped onto the deck, then returned to her pseudo-labor.

Megan Lundy was working furiously at an easel that held a three-by-four-foot canvas, lost in her work, thrusting with her brush like a duelist. She was wearing a paint-spattered terry-cloth jumpsuit, a big-boned woman, forty-plus, squarish face, broad shoulders, a wide bottom, and no discernible waistline between. Her eyes were dark and intense, with heavy brows that matched her close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair.

"Make yourselves at home," she said absently. "I'll be done in a few minutes. Hate to lose the light. October . . ." Her voice trailed off as her consciousness disappeared into her art.

Ray strolled to the railing, politely giving his back to the half-dressed girl. He folded his arms and stared out over the water and I sensed a Do Not Disturb sign in his stance.

A pair of French doors opened into a studio and I wandered in. It was a huge room for the size of the house. All the inner partition

walls had been removed, leaving naked steel jackposts to support the roof. The wall facing the lake and the two adjoining were glass, huge picture windows with an incredible view of the sky and the shore. The street-side wall was covered with paintings, some properly hung, but many just stacked one atop the other.

The subjects were similar to the scene outside, women of various ages and physiques, some pregnant, some not. They were all shown at tasks, typing, washing their hair, mopping a floor, bathing a child. And all were in shackles, though some of the chains were laced with flowers, and a few gleamed like precious metal. The colors were subtle, pastels that might be found on any motel wall, an understatement that lent the work a fiercer impact.

And they were powerful. Stark emotion that would have moved a stone. But there were too many. My eyes were drawn from one to the next so quickly I had to turn away to keep from being overwhelmed.

The window ledges were cluttered with half-squeezed tubes of paint, discarded pencils, charcoal stubs. And handcuffs and shackles. I picked a pair up, wondering if they were props. Nope. They were very real indeed. Odd. The shackles probably weighed no more than a pound or two each, yet the bondage they represented made them seem infinitely heavier.

A small table draped in gold velvet stood in one corner, a display of a different kind. They were ceramic replicas of what appeared to be primeval figures, rude clay earth-mothers with swollen bellies and breasts. One of them was so striking I actually caught my breath. A pregnant nude rising from water, her arms raised in victory. She looked ancient and familiar at the same time, as though I'd known her in another life. I was utterly enchanted. Without thinking, I reached out to her . . .

"Please don't touch them, Mitch," Megan Lundy said. "Some of them were never fired, so they're quite fragile. From my Ashtoreth period."

"Ashtoreth?" I said, glancing up. On the deck the model was pulling a pair of slacks on under her bathrobe. Ray was still watching the last of the light fade into the water.

"Ashtoreth, Phoenician goddess of fertility," Megan said, tossing a gauze dustcover over the display. "I'll bet I did a hundred different versions of her in college. And sold about two. I keep these around to remind me that there's more to art than passion."

"They're very powerful," I said. "The figure in the water . . ."

"That's right, you're the diver, aren't you? Must be a tough field for a woman to break into," she said briskly, taking my arm and leading me to the wall of art. "And what do you make of my current endeavor?"

"Stunning," I said honestly.

"I'm outa here, Meg," the model said, popping her head in the door. "Think you'll stop by later?"

"I'll call you," Megan said, giving the girl a goodbye kiss that lingered a heartbeat too long to be sisterly. The girl whispered something to Megan, then waved goodbye in my general direction and wandered off.

"Oh, to be that young again," Megan sighed. "You were saying about the paintings?"

"I really like this series. They're rude and refined at the same time, and for somebody who gave up on passion, they nearly bleed it."

"I didn't say I lost any passion," Megan said. "I just learned successful art requires more than youthful enthusiasm. I call this grouping Womyn in Chains, women spelled with a 'y.' Personally, I think they're a shade too topical for pure art, but they sell like proverbial hotcakes in New York. I earn more for a couple of canvases now than my college salary for a year."

"Shouldn't you take some steps against break-ins?" Calderon asked, joining us. "I mean, this place is all glass and I didn't notice an alarm."

"You're obviously an out-of-towner," Megan said drily. "Nobody would steal art in Huron Harbor. I'd be lucky to get ten bucks a pop at the county fair. But in a chic gallery in the Apple, with suitable framing . . . You're smiling. Do you find my work amusing?"

"Of course," Calderon said, glancing at her. "It's meant to be ironic, isn't it?"

"In what way?"

"The chains," he said. "They're not attached to anything."

"That's it exactly," Megan said, nodding in approval. "You'd be amazed how many politically correct types who babble about the meaning of my work miss that aspect of it completely. The truth is, the chains of our own making are heavier than any the world puts on us. Or at least it's my truth."

"It's true, I think," Ray said, "and not only for women."

"No, not just women. We all shackle ourselves one way or another. You're very perceptive. I take it you're the Mr. Calderon Mitch

phoned me about. Forgive me for rattling on. You two didn't come to talk about art. How can I help you?"

"Mrs. McClain said you stopped by while my brother was visiting her. I was hoping you could tell me something that . . . Well, that might help."

"I heard they found his car," she said. "I'm very sorry, he seemed like a nice young man. But I don't see how I can help you. He left a few minutes after I arrived."

"Mrs. McClain said they'd been drinking," I prompted.

"Yes, I think they'd both had a few, but . . . Look, I intended to be tactful, but I've got no talent for it. And considering what's happened, maybe the truth flat out is better. And the truth is, your brother had a pretty fair buzz going, Mr. Calderon. He was flushed, and he was more than a little aggressive. In fact, I asked him to leave."

"You asked him to leave? Why?" Ray asked.

"He was out of line," Megan said bluntly. "He was going on about how he'd been cheated all his life, and part of *this*, which I took to mean Audrey's home and whatever, should have been his. Audrey was upset and . . . Anyway, I asked him to leave and he did."

"How drunk would you say he was? Too drunk to drive?"

"I wouldn't think so," Megan said, frowning. "I mean, he wasn't staggering or anything. But since I don't drive myself, it's hard for me to judge."

"You don't drive?"

"I'm a New Yorker. I attended college here, then came back to live a dozen years or so ago. The town's small, so I either ride my bike or walk. I was jogging that day. In any case, your brother left, and that's really all I can tell you. I'm sorry. This must be awful for you. I wish I could help."

"Perhaps you can. Did you know Mrs. McClain's husband Walter?"

"Walter?" Megan said, surprised. "Not really. I met him once or twice when I was in school."

"You were in school together?"

"No, he was a few years older, but Audrey was quite active in the arts when I was an undergrad, so I knew her. They came to fundraisers and things together. God, they were a gorgeous couple in those days. Life can be . . . Well, you know."

"Actually I don't. What happened to them?"

"Walt died in Viet Nam and Audrey had a fall. Lost her baby and the use of her legs. Lost everything, really."

"Take a look at this," he said, handing her the photograph. "Would you say this is a good likeness of Mr. McClain?"

She grimaced. "Doesn't do him justice. He was quite a hunk back then."

"And now?" Calderon said. "What would he look like now?"

"Now?" she echoed, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"The FBI has computers that can age a person's photograph. You're an artist, a very good one. Do you think you could sketch a likeness of Walter the way he might look today?"

"You want a sketch of Walter?" she said. "What on earth for? I don't understand."

"I'm not sure I do either. But my brother came to this town looking for a man and a few hours later he disappeared. Maybe it was an accident. But if it wasn't, I can only think of one person who'd have a reason to harm him."

"You mean Walter? But he's dead."

Calderon shrugged. "So people keep telling me. But suppose he isn't?"

"Look, I'm very sorry for your trouble," Megan said curtly, "but I couldn't do what you ask even if I thought you might be right. Audrey McClain is an old friend who's had more than her share of pain in her life. I wouldn't risk hurting her for the world. I'm sorry."

"No problem," Calderon said. "I understand. Thank you for seeing me. And I really do like your work very much. If you think of anything that might help, I'm at the Harbor Inn." He took the photo from her and walked across the deck and down the stairway.

"What an intriguing young man," Megan said thoughtfully. "Have you known him long?"

"No ma'am," I said. "I scarcely know him at all."

"Do you have any idea how crazy that sounded?" I asked. We were in my Jeep, headed back to the Nest.

"Maybe it did," he said quietly. "But it kept eating at me all day in the chopper, looking down at all that empty water. I kept asking myself how my brother could vanish so quickly. And the only answer I could come up with is Walter McClain."

"But Mrs. McClain said he never came back here. They even had him declared dead."

"Well, for openers, he wouldn't have come back here right away, not with the army looking for him. But let's say he showed up a few years later. Do you really think his father would turn him in to the army to do a long stretch in Leavenworth for attempted murder? Or would he help him start over? Buy him a new identity, maybe even cosmetic surgery? The family can obviously afford it."

"But since he's still wanted by the military, why would he risk staying here? He could be anywhere."

"No, I think he'd be nearby. His people are here, his money's here. But most of all, I think he's here because my brother fell off the world the day he showed up looking for him."

"I see," I said slowly. "What are you going to do?"

"In the morning I'm going out with the Coast Guard again for another air search over the lake. If we come up empty, they'll have done all they can and they'll pack it in."

"But you won't?"

"No ma'am, I'll just be getting started."

"And will you be looking for your brother? Or Walter?"

"My brother's the reason I came. But I may ask around about the possibly-not-so-late Mr. McClain while I'm at it."

"You'll be dredging up a lot of unhappiness the McClain family would rather forget, and probably for nothing."

"Sorry about that. Sometimes the truth hurts."

"You're the one it could hurt, Ray. This is a small town. The McClains have a lot of friends and a fair amount of clout."

"How much clout? Do they own Sheriff Bauer, for instance?"

"No, nobody owns Charlie. But even if you're right and Walter is here, which I don't believe for a second, won't asking a lot of questions scare him off?"

"He didn't run when my brother asked about him. He took him out. But Jimmy was really just a kid. I haven't been a kid for a long, long time."

"I see," I said slowly, and I really did. "You think if he's here he may try to kill you, don't you? And you want him to."

He looked over at me a moment, with eyes as empty as an Aztec mask. He didn't answer me. He didn't have to.

I did my best to put Ray Calderon and his problems out of my mind the next day. I left the cook and a waitress on their own in the Nest, locked myself in the dive shop, and began the post-summer inventory. Masks, snorkels, fins, lures, every display had to be

checked against the stock lists. The diving season was over, but the hunting season was already on us, and soon I'd need to spend most of my time in the bar/restaurant half of the Nest.

I suppose taking inventory should be considered scut work, but the truth is I love doing it, love being alone in my own shop with the sweet-oily scent of new gear, the gumdrop colors of hyperthane fins and snorkels. I grew up in this shop, and some of the happiest times of my childhood were here. So I time-traveled as I worked, spending a few hours with the girl I'd been, and sometimes glimpsing the person I've become through her eyes. We get along quite well, that girl and I.

But we weren't alone. Images of Ray and his brother kept intruding at odd moments. I grew up without siblings. When my son Corey was born I was young, single, and on my own. When I went to work on the platforms, I had no options but to place him in a private school. And when my father died and I moved up here, Corey asked if he could stay in school for the time being, with his friends.

Being away from Corey is an agony for me. But at least when we part I know I'll see him again soon. I could only imagine what Jimmy's death meant to Ray, and yet his pain seemed so real to me that it might have been my own.

Sympathy? Or were we connecting on a deeper, more intense level? I conceded that I found him attractive, and I sensed the same feelings in him. But at this point in my life . . .

A knock on the shop door snapped me out of it. I considered not answering, but whoever was knocking could read the Closed sign. Ray? I opened it cautiously.

"Hi," Megan Lundy panted, "got a minute?" Her face was flushed and dewy from running and she was dressed for it, in a faded mauve sweat suit and high-mileage Nikes.

"Come on in," I said. "Can I get you a drink? Water? Gatorade? Whatever?"

"No, thanks," she said, glancing around the shop curiously. "Actually, I wanted to talk to you about your friend Calderon. Are we alone?"

"Just us and the ghosts of summer," I said. "What about Ray?"

"He's been making me crazy. That little speech he made last night about Walter McClain, and what he might look like now? Mind you, I don't think he's right, but . . . I just couldn't get the idea out of my head. So I did a few sketches, variations of the picture he showed me." She gave me a sketch pad, but held my hand closed on it.

"Promise me you'll be careful with this," she said. "I want to help, but wouldn't want Audrey McClain to think I was being disloyal."

"Keeping Calderon discreet is becoming a second career for me lately," I said, opening the book. The first two drawings showed Walter with various beards. The third made me pause.

"That one's Walter plus a couple of metric tons," she explained, watching my face.

"He seems familiar," I said.

"Yes, I noticed it too," she said. "He looks a bit like Wally's Uncle Gordon. Probably just a family resemblance. Blubber tends to blur lines of distinction."

"Too true," I said, flipping through the others. They showed Walter bald, partially bald, and . . . with a bushy mane of hair and a seamed face. "This one could almost be Ross."

"It could also be David Bowie on a bad hair day," Megan said wryly. "That's the problem. Once you start wondering about a thing like this, you start to see Walter's ghost everywhere. I imagine that's how conspiracy cults get started."

"What's this one?" I asked. It was a cartoon sketch of a crone, at least eighty.

"A cautionary reminder."

"Of what? It's an old woman."

"Look again. For a young woman."

"Ah," I said, nodding, "right. I see her." The two faces shared the same lines, but the women depicted were decades apart, facing in different directions.

"It's a child's game, but it might be a good thing for Ray to keep in mind. These are just sketches. They don't prove anything, and by the way, I'm doing them as much for you as for your friend."

"For me?"

"I enjoyed talking to you yesterday. You struck me as an interesting character. I love this town and the lake country, but sometimes, as a professional woman on my own, I feel like what's-her-name in *Clan of the Cave Bear*. Ever get that feeling?"

"Sometimes," I admitted. "Not often."

"My life's a shambles right now," Megan said briskly. "I'm having a solo show in New York at the end of the month and I still have several paintings to finish. But afterwards? We should get together for an evening, just to get acquainted."

"I'd like that," I said. "I really like your work."

"I'd say the same," she said, glancing curiously around the shop, "if I had the vaguest idea of what it is you do. But I look forward to hearing about it. When the first snow flies?" She offered me her hand. "Deal?"

"Deal," I agreed. "When the first snow flies."

"Interesting," Ray said, flipping through the sketches that night. Dinner at the Nest was becoming a habit, or perhaps I just hoped it would. He looked tired. He'd flown most of the day with the Coast Guard chopper. No luck. He paused a moment at the sketch that resembled Ross. Then flipped past it. "Last night she said she wouldn't help. Why did she change her mind?"

"I don't know. She said she couldn't get the idea out of her head."

"I know the feeling," he said. "So. Other than what's-his-name, Ross? Does anyone else look familiar?"

"I'm not sure. There are twelve thousand people in this town, thirty thousand in the county. That may be small potatoes compared to Detroit or Norfolk, but it's still a lot of people."

"My mother said Jimmy was taller than his father, but not as heavily built. That eliminates everybody who isn't roughly six foot, say a hundred and seventy pounds minimum. Does that narrow it down any?"

The edge in Ray's voice made me hesitant to mention the overweight Walter's resemblance to Gordon McClain. And fortunately, Charlie Bauer interrupted us. He spotted us as soon as he stepped into the room, and came directly over. He may have looked normal to Ray, his brown county uniform slightly disheveled, his freckled face open as an apple pie. But something was up. I sensed it in the way he moved.

"Mitch, mind if I join you?" He took the chair beside me without waiting for an answer. "I heard the air search came up empty again today, Mr. Calderon. I'm sorry."

"Me too," Ray said. "The pilot was a good man, though. A stone pro. He did his best."

"And so did we," Charlie said. "My men extended their range today. We either checked with the owners or searched the beach ourselves for a full ten miles along the south shore. We found no sign of your brother, and I'm afraid that's all we can do for the present. If anything develops, I'll contact you, of course. Will you be heading back to Norfolk?"

"Not right away. I'll be staying on awhile."

"I see. To look for your brother?"

"For that. And maybe more. Let me ask you straight out, Charlie. The song and dance Mrs. McClain gave us about her husband being dead, legally and otherwise? Did you buy it?"

"I think she believes it," Charlie said carefully. "Maybe she needs to. Which doesn't necessarily make it true. On the other hand, even if she's wrong and he is alive, which I seriously doubt, he's not around here."

"I understand there are thirty thousand people in this county. Do you know them all personally?"

"Nope, but I knew Walt. Played high school football with him, in fact. He was a few years older, but I knew him."

"How long ago was that?"

"More years than I'd care to recall," Charlie said, unoffended. "But I think I'd still know him if I met him."

"Would you? How about these people?" he said, passing Charlie the sketch pad. "Do you know any of them?"

Charlie riffled through the pages, quickly at first, then again more slowly. He frowned at the cartoon of the old/young woman, then smiled. "Nice work. I'm impressed. Where'd you get this?"

"It doesn't matter. Do any of them look familiar?"

"Sure. All of them. They're all Walter. Plus they're general enough to resemble a fair number of folks."

"Good. So if I show them around enough, someone might recognize someone eventually."

"Possibly. People still spot Elvis now and again. An identification from a sketch doesn't prove anything."

"I'm not interested in proving anything. But if he's here, there's a good chance he knows what happened to my brother. And I think he'll tell me."

"I see. You know, Mr. Calderon, I lost a brother once. In Viet Nam. I came back, he didn't. And it still hurts. And because of that, I'm not unsympathetic to your situation. But I can't have you crashin' around the countryside on some vigilante manhunt. Nothing'd come of it but trouble."

"I haven't broken any laws, Sheriff. But Walter McClain has. He attempted murder once, and maybe he's still at it. Aren't you interested in finding him? Or does his family have a little too much . . . clout?"

Charlie eyed him for a moment without answering, but a rosy flush began to creep above his collar. "If Walter McClain was in my

county, Mr. Calderon, I'd bust him like any other wanted felon, family or no. But I don't believe that he is."

"You think my brother just happened to have an accident a few hours after he showed up looking for Walter?"

"No sir, I didn't say that. I don't know what happened to your brother yet. Neither do you. And I'm not ignoring the fact that he disappeared very soon after he arrived here, or that foul play might have been involved."

"No one here had a reason to harm him but Walter McClain."

"That's correct. No one *here*. But your brother was on parole. Maybe his problems followed him here. Or yours did."

"Mine?"

"I took the liberty of doing a little checking on you, Mr. Calderon, nothing official, just a friendly phone call to my counterpart in Norfolk. He said you're a colorful character. That since you got out of the navy you've been running with some rough people. Some of the same people your brother was mixed up with."

"We have some of the same friends," Calderon conceded. "Which is why I'm sure my brother's disappearance isn't connected to anything back home."

"But it could be," Charlie said. "And from where I'm sitting, it's a helluva lot more likely than Walt McClain hiding out under my nose. So I'll tell you what, Mr. Calderon, we're gonna do a deal, you and me. I'll run a quiet background check on anyone who even vaguely matches up with these sketches, work records, driver's licenses, and fingerprints if anything seems even slightly hinky. If I turn up Walt, I'll fall on him like a landslide. But if they all check out clean, I want your word you'll go back to Norfolk and leave the McClain family alone. God knows they've had trouble enough because of him."

"How do I know you'll actually investigate anything?"

"Because I just said so. Do you think I'd lie about a thing like this?"

Ray eyed him a moment, then shook his head slowly. "No, I don't believe you would. Fair enough. If you can't shake anything loose, I'll go."

"Good. I'll take your word for it. Especially since I can make damn sure you keep it. I'll take the sketches and you take yourself a nice vacation. And I'd better not hear that you're harassing anyone. Clear?"

"I'll stay out of your way," Ray said. "Good luck."

"I'll be in touch," Charlie said, rising. "Mitch, you take care." He hesitated, as if he wanted to say something, then turned abruptly and made his way out through the dinner crowd.

"A very tactful guy," Calderon said, watching Charlie stalk off. "I think he wanted to warn you about me, but didn't want to step over the line. Your line, not mine."

"Warn me about what? That you're a colorful character?"

"I plead guilty to being a character," he said. "But color's kind of in the eye of the beholder, don't you think?"

"What I think is that you gave up that sketch book without much of an argument. And I'm wondering why."

Calderon mulled the question over a moment, then shrugged. "The bottom line is, I believed him when he said he wants to nail this bastard as badly as I do. Plus, he knows the town and he can check out the people on that pad a lot more efficiently than I could."

"True," I said. "But there's more to it, isn't there? I can't see you sitting around waiting for Charlie to turn something up. What are you going to do?"

"Since I'm technically on vacation, I think I'll take in some of the countryside."

"The countryside?"

"Right. The way I figure it, if Jimmy's death wasn't accidental, then there's a reason why his body hasn't turned up."

"How do you mean?"

"The way I read McClain, he's a headstrong, spoiled punk who turns violent when anyone crosses him. Let's say he came on Jimmy after he left the house, maybe followed him, stopped him somewhere. They had words—and Walt killed him. Now he's got a big problem. If the body turns up showing signs of violence, there's a damned short list of suspects. But if Jimmy's car is found in the river with no body in it, it's an accident. Case closed. So maybe we didn't find the body in the water because it was never there."

"And where do you think it is?"

"I was hoping you could help me with that. I'd guess it would be somewhere nearby. He didn't have time to do anything very complicated."

"Even so, there's a lot of open country around here, Ray, thousands of acres of state forest. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"It's bow-hunting season," I said slowly. "Bow hunters are out in all kinds of weather, and most of them are pretty fair trackers. I

don't think he'd risk running into someone on open land or having a hunter stumble across the body. And he might not have to."

"Why not?"

"Because the McClain family owns quite a lot of property in the area. Private land he'd probably be familiar with."

"How much land?"

"A lot," I said. "Hang on a moment, and I can tell you exactly how much." I stepped into my office, rummaged through my desk and came up with a county plat-map pamphlet. I sat down beside Ray and flipped it open.

"These maps show property ownership for the county. According to this, the McClains own . . . several thousand acres."

"Are you familiar with any of these places?"

"Some of them," I said. "This twelve-hundred-acre section here is the plant. It's fenced, well lighted, and runs three shifts, twenty-four hours a day."

"Unlikely then. What's this piece along the shoreline?"

"That's the estate, where we were the first night. Possible, I suppose, but there are neighbors. . . . I don't think so."

"What about this big area over here?"

"That's hill country, southwest of the town," I said. "It's undeveloped, no houses. Loggers occasionally do some cutting up there, but that's about it."

"Fenced?"

"I'm not sure. I haven't been up there in years. As I recall, there are old logging trails in and out of it."

"Can I get in there with a car?"

"It would be difficult, the roads are pretty rough. A vehicle with higher suspension would be better, say a pickup or a van. But I don't think you realize how big an area we're talking about. It would take an army to search it all."

"I won't have to search it all. It was raining, remember, and Jimmy weighed one eighty. If he's up there, he'll be near a road. Where can I rent a pickup?"

"You won't have to," I said. "If you're dead set on crashing around up there, you can borrow my Jeep."

"I wouldn't want to impose."

"No problem. It just sits here all day when I'm working, and you may need the four-wheel drive. Besides, in a way I've been involved in this from the first. I'd like to see it through."

"Then I gratefully accept."

"Fine, I'm here every morning at eight, you can pick it up any time after that. There is one thing though. A lot of the trails up there are visible from the town. You'll almost certainly be noticed, so watch yourself. Oh, and wear a blaze orange vest. It's bow-hunting season. It'd be a shame if a guy who's trying so hard to get killed on purpose got shish-kebopped by accident."

"I'll bear it in mind," he said, smiling. "I insist on paying for the use of your vehicle, though. And I'd like to ask one other favor. A big one."

"Which is?"

"Have dinner with me tonight. My treat. And let's talk about something else. Anything."

I hesitated. I'd been half expecting this. And I'd already decided to keep my distance. God knows my life was complicated enough without someone new in it. And yet . . .

I said yes. And we had dinner, and lingered, and talked. About everything. What it was like growing up a tomboy in a northwoods town, doing a man's work from the time I was fifteen. And he told me about his boyhood on interchangeable naval bases with a stepfather who was always at sea. He had less to say about his present life, only that he'd been hoping to straighten Jimmy out.

Our tastes were markedly different, in music, movies, everything. All we seemed to have in common was a mutual lone-wolf wariness. And chemistry, of course. Serious chemistry. The kind that makes differences seem unimportant. At first. I think I felt it the first time I saw him at the river. I expected it to fade.

But it didn't. Over the next few days, Ray borrowed my Jeep every morning and returned at dusk, tired, but not discouraged. And we had dinner. And talked. And we became . . . friends. Who might become lovers in time. I sensed it, and so did he. It didn't need to be said. Or rushed. It would happen. And then too many things began to happen. Too fast.

I was in my office at the Nest finishing up the dive-shop inventory. Hannah McClain rapped once, sharply, then stalked in. "We need to talk," she said curtly, closing the door behind her. She was dressed for shopping, an ankle-length muted tweed skirt and jacket. Her makeup was immaculate and I envied her. If I wear anything more complicated than lipstick and a trace of blush I look like a Halloween hooker. It must be a great comfort to know that first grim look in your morning mirror can be improved on.

But if marrying money had improved her clothes and her look, some things hadn't changed. She'd always been working-girl direct with me. And she still was.

"I understand this guy Calderon's been driving your wheels," she said brusquely. "Have you two got something going?"

I didn't say anything.

"Look, don't play coy with me, Mitch, this is serious. If you care about him at all, you've got to get him to move on before he gets hurt."

"Why should he get hurt? What's wrong?"

"It's . . . Wally," she sighed, slumping down into the chair facing my desk. "Ever since Calderon's brother showed up he's been coming unglued. We had it out last night, and he told me he'd been waiting for something like this to happen all his life."

"What do you mean, waiting for it?"

"Wally blames himself for his mom being crippled. He was four when she got pregnant the second time, and he was jealous, afraid the baby'd take his place. He wanted it to go away. He even prayed it would. So when Audrey fell and lost the kid, he figured it was his fault. And he's been afraid ever since that she'd find out and dump him, I guess. Which may be why we're married three years and still live with his mom and he's afraid to have kids . . . Ah hell, what a mess." She pressed her fingertips against her temples, massaging them.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I need your help. You were always decent to me in school when a lot of kids treated me like white trash. I know everyone in town figures I screwed Wally into marrying me. Well, maybe I did. Nothing ever came easy for me. But I didn't do it just for the money. And right now I'm willing to drop a fair chunk of cash to avoid trouble. How much would Calderon want to back off? Just go away?"

"I'm not sure," I said carefully.

"Well, the most I can scrape together'd be six, seven grand if I sell some things Wally gave me. It'll have to be enough. It's not like he's entitled to anything, you know. His brother was, maybe, but not him. Anyway, that's the best I can do."

"Why do anything? Why do you want him to go?"

"Because I'm afraid of what Wally might do. He's a terrific guy in a lot of ways, but on this one subject he's as crazy as his old man ever was. And he's not the only one. His fat-ass uncle Gordon, the ex-con? Ever since Audrey took him on at the plant he's been looking

for an angle, a way to buddy up to Wally, and he figures this is it. Calderon's obviously checking things out up in the hills. And Gordon's saying he's sizing up the McClain property getting ready for a lawsuit that'll throw everybody out of work."

"That's nonsense."

"I know it, and maybe Wally even knows it. But some of the mouth-breathers that do scutwork at the plant don't. And they can be dead serious when it comes to protecting their jobs. Mitch, you've got to call this guy off or he's gonna end up like his brother."

"What do you know about his brother?"

"Only what I heard the other night. He went to the plant, then the house, then apparently wound up in the river. That's really all I know, except that I was surprised when Audrey said Ross wasn't there."

"You mean he was?"

"I don't know, but he almost never leaves the house, even on his days off. He's always suckin' around Audrey, or me. God, I want to get out of that damned tomb and get a place of our own. But it'll never happen if Wally winds up in jail for beating your pal half to death. How about it? Can we do a deal?"

"Maybe we could if it was up to me," I said honestly, "but it's not. Ray doesn't want money, he's trying to find his brother. And I don't think he'll leave until he does."

"Then maybe he won't leave at all," she said coldly, rising to go. "Do me a favor. Tell Calderon if he's so dead set on committing suicide to take a header off the Mackinac bridge. The view's terrific and it'd be a lot less trouble for the rest of us. I'll see you, Mitch." And she stalked out. She had looks, money, and social position. But I didn't envy her. Not even a little.

"What do you expect me to do?" Ray asked at dinner that night. "Pack it in because some local rednecks are getting antsy? Stirring up the locals was part of the plan, remember?"

"Wrong. The plan was to draw Walter into the open if he's here. This is different. The people up here are different, Ray. Nobody lives in the north country because it's a great career move. They stay here for the lakes, and the hills. And the hunting. This is gun country. NRA heaven."

"The whole U.S. is gun country nowadays," Ray said mildly. "But maybe it doesn't matter. I'm nearly finished. I might've found something interesting today, though."

"Interesting how?"

"It may be nothing. I came on it at dusk, and I'll have to scout the area to see if there's been any activity recently. But I've got a feeling . . . Do you work Sundays?"

"No, not usually. Why?"

"I might need a little help. If you're free Sunday."

"What kind of help? And why me and not Charlie?"

"Maybe I just prefer your company. In fact, I think I'd rather spend time with you than anyone else on the planet. Would that be so hard to understand?"

Our eyes met, and held. And suddenly we'd entered dangerous ground. And I wasn't ready for it. Not yet. I didn't know him well enough, and I knew Charlie didn't trust him. And so I deftly changed the subject, and he was courteous enough to let me. I wish to God he hadn't been.

I read it in Charlie Bauer's face the moment he stepped into the Nest the next afternoon. Serious trouble. I was working in my office, but I rose involuntarily and walked out to meet him as he crossed the room. "What's happened?" I said.

"Calderon," he said simply. "He's been shot."

I felt as though someone had turned the volume down on the room. "Is he alive?" I asked. And suddenly my eyes were stinging.

"Yeah," Charlie said, glancing away, "but he's in rough shape. Real rough. He may not make it."

"I'll get my coat."

"There's no rush," Charlie said, following me into the office and closing the door. "He's still in surgery at County General and he'll be in intensive care after that. No visitors. But maybe you can help. Do you know where he was today?"

"No, I . . . In the hills, I think. Why?"

"We're trying to trace his movements. He cracked your Jeep up just outside the city limits on River Road. Sideswiped a parked car and spun broadside. A couple of Canadian tourists stopped to help. They said he was weaving before the crash but no other cars were near him, so apparently he was shot somewhere else and he was trying to make it to town."

"How seriously is he hurt?"

"As bad as it gets. He was shot in the head, probably with a small-caliber handgun at close range. The wound showed powder burns.

His skull's fractured, his left eye is gone and the other one's severely injured. So even if he survives the surgery . . ."

I sat down on the edge of my desk. Had to, or I would have fallen. "He'll be blind?" I said, my voice barely a whisper. And for a moment I was in the river again, groping around in the rental car. Lost in black water. Forever.

"Maybe not," Charlie said carefully. "But . . . Yeah, maybe. If he makes it at all." He opened my liquor cabinet, poured a stiff brandy into a snifter, and held it out to me. "Here, you look like you need this."

"No," I said. "I'll—I'll be all right in a minute."

Charlie hesitated, then knocked back half the brandy with a single swallow. And somehow seeing that snapped me out of the fog.

"You don't drink," I said. "I've never even seen you sip a beer."

"That's because you usually see me on duty."

"You're on duty now."

"That's right," he said. He drank the rest of the brandy, baring his teeth against the sting. "God, Mitch, what the hell's happening? We've got a quiet little town here, and all of a sudden I've got one man missing, probably dead, and now his brother's been shot. Jesus, it was awful, blood all over . . ." His voice was trembling, and he stopped suddenly. "I'm sorry. I've seen bodies before. Maybe too many. You said he was up in the hills? What was he doing there?"

"Looking for his brother. He thought Walt might have hidden the body on land his family owns."

"I see. Well, he couldn't have been shot up there. There's no way he could have driven those roads in the shape he was in. Maybe he can tell us when he comes around. If he does. I'd better get back to the hospital. Would you like to come along?"

"Yes," I said.

County General was abustle, as usual. A harried intern in a blood-spattered smock told us Ray was still in surgery, still critical. They were trying to contact a specialist from the University of Michigan to do the surgery on his right eye. If Ray survived the night.

Charlie and I sat quietly on plastic chairs in the hall. I don't know how long we waited. An hour or so. At some point I began to shiver uncontrollably and Charlie draped his jacket over my shoulders. And then his beeper went off. He used the phone at the nurse's station.

"I've gotta go, Mitch," he said, kneeling beside me. "Got a three-car pileup on south twenty-three. You gonna wait here?"

I nodded.

"Okay. If he regains consciousness, you ask him who shot him. Nothing else, at least not at first. Okay?"

I nodded again, and Charlie trotted off, grateful to be moving, I think. A half-hour later a nurse in surgical greens came out, holding a plastic packet at arm's length in front of her.

"Dr. Kienzle said there's no point in your waiting. They're going to insert a cranial shunt to try to control the cerebral edema. The patient won't regain consciousness for at least eight hours, maybe longer. These are his clothes. Do you have gloves?"

"Gloves?"

"The pants are wet," she said briskly, placing the package on the seat beside me. "Apparently he soiled himself when he was shot. I have to get back. The doctor said he'll call the station and brief you when we've finished. You can borrow a pair of gloves at the nurse's station. You shouldn't handle these without them."

"Miss?" I said. But the door to the surgery was already closing behind her. She didn't hear me.

I sat there a moment, eyeing the package of sodden clothing. And I realized she'd left it with me because I was wearing Charlie's jacket. I unfolded the plastic wrapping.

Phew! I grimaced involuntarily at the stench. She was right, his jeans were sodden. But his pockets seemed to be dry, more or less. The hell with it. I went through them and retrieved his wallet, a pocketknife, and some loose change. I found what I was looking for in his shirt pocket. A plat map of the hill area, neatly divided into search grids with more than half of them X-ed out. At least we'd have some idea of where he'd been searching.

I started to close the sheet again, then hesitated. There was something wrong. His pants pockets were dry. But if he'd soiled himself . . . I picked up his jeans by the waistband and held them out. They were wet all right, but it couldn't be urine. There was a neat waterline roughly halfway up the thighs. The waist area was blood-stained, but otherwise dry.

I raised the pants higher and sniffed the wet area. Definitely not urine. Similar though, and familiar. The rotten-egg stench the nurse had smelled was hydrogen sulfide, a mild chemical stew that sometimes seeps into groundwater near abandoned mines or quarries. It stinks, but it's harmless. I've even dived in it a few times, exploring

old mine shafts in the Upper Peninsula. Somewhere, Ray must have waded in water contaminated with sulfide.

But there aren't any mines in the hills he'd been searching. I folded the jeans carefully and wrapped them up, then scanned the plat map again.

He'd been methodical, moving from the north, section by section. I'd been in those hills, of course, used to run in them when I was a girl. The section he'd apparently been working was in a valley, but he couldn't have gotten in there. It was completely fenced off because of . . .

Sinkholes.

There were four or five of them back there, craters from sixty to a hundred and fifty yards across, roughly eighty feet deep, open pits carved out of the hills by an underground river. They've been fenced off for years because the footing's dangerously unstable. It seemed an unlikely place to hide a body. If you threw it down, it'd be visible from the rim. And even if you risked your neck to climb down to bury it, the crater floor was mostly moss that'd show any disturbance.

Except for the largest of them. A branch of the river ran across the floor of the pit. And disappeared into the hillside.

Anything dropped into it would be swept underground for several miles until the river surfaced again south of the hills and emptied into Thunder Bay. Unless maybe it was weighted. In which case it might be carried underground. And would remain there.

That had to be it. The water was contaminated with sulfide. And Ray had said he might need my help. He'd intended to search the riverbed where it disappeared underground. He must have been wading around down there, scouting the area.

And someone had shot him.

But it hadn't happened there. He was closer to town, Charlie said. Shot in the head at close range. But after Hannah's warning, I doubted he would have stopped for a stranger who looked anything like Walter. Someone else then? Did Walter have help? A friend? Maybe a son? Or even . . . a cop? An old football buddy, say, or someone in his department?

I didn't care for this last idea, but it would explain a lot. How Ray's brother had disappeared so easily, and why the army hadn't been able to find Walter. He could have been a step ahead of them all the way.

But if Walter was here, who was he now? I had no idea. Or perhaps too many. The only thing I was sure of was, he'd be off his guard

now, thinking he'd solved his problem. And if I could find Jimmy Calderon's body, it would flush Walter into the light like the cockroach he was.

The winds of autumn had been at work, covering the hills with a carpet of leaves, scarlet maples, and golden oak. Even the air up here was heady with the scent of fall, woodsmoke and wet pine. Hunting season.

I parked my dad's old pickup truck at the end of the logging trail near the eight-foot chain-link fence that surrounded the sinkholes. The fence had been cut, years ago judging from the rusty ends of the severed wires. Kids, probably. You can't fence off curiosity, and most adventurous local kids had been back here at least once. I'd explored the area myself when I was fifteen or so, with a gaggle of friends.

We'd been disappointed. The sinks were really just giant holes in the ground, so large and obviously natural that they didn't seem particularly wondrous. The vegetation in them was the same as on the hills around them. Jack pines and aspen ringed the rims like sentries, and in a few spots trees clung like climbers on rocky ledges. The crater floors were a camouflage blend of moss and swamp grass, ochre and autumn gold.

The largest of them was different. A finger of the Thunder River surged to the surface roughly a third of the way across the floor of the crater, glittering like mercury in the afternoon sun. I guessed it was twenty feet across. It bisected the pit for seventy yards or so, then disappeared into the southwest wall of the hole.

I stepped carefully to the crater rim directly above the river's exit, wary of the footing. The soil was red clay covered with a slippery layer of pine needles. I'm no tracker, but someone had obviously been here recently. Ray? Possibly.

The drop to the river was sheer, a free fall of a hundred and fifty feet. You wouldn't have to carry a body down, you could just push it over the rim and let the current do the rest.

I'd brought along a three-hundred-foot coil of nylon rope, thinking I'd have to lower my diving gear to the crater floor, but it wasn't necessary. A section of the rim had collapsed since I was here last, forming a ramp to the bottom of the pit, steep but walkable.

I strapped on my air-tank backpack, slung the duffle bag with the rest of my gear over one shoulder, the coil of nylon line over the other, and worked my way down.

It was a rough go. The footing was steeper than it appeared from above, especially since I was loaded down with what felt like a ton of gear. I paced myself, pausing several times to catch my breath and scan the area. The view was heart-stopping, cloud-castles scudding across the open bowl of the moss-draped cliffs. But its beauty was diminished for me because Ray might never see it again. Or anything else. If he survived.

And then I noticed the footprints. Slight depressions were visible in moss and clay. I knelt and examined them. The edges were sharp, unsoftened by the rain earlier in the week. Someone had definitely been down here. Ray. This was the place then. It had to be. I felt it to the core of my soul.

At the hospital I'd been numb, shocked by what had happened to him. But as I worked my way down into the pit, I felt my spirit and my energy level rekindling, fueled by an icy anger I've only felt a few times in my life. A killing rage.

The river roiled and eddied when it met the cliff face, forming a pool. It didn't look deep, eight to ten feet. I couldn't be sure because the water was the color of café au lait, clouded with sulfide seepage. The foul reek of it was much stronger down here, held close by the walls. It was a rank stench of decay, as though the sinkhole was an open wound in the earth, and gangrene had set in.

The current looked steady, but not too fast; working in it would be no problem. My dive plan was simple; I'd anchor the nylon cable to one of the stunted jack pines near the pool's edge, then let the river carry me underground. If I was right, I shouldn't have to go very far. This current would move a weighted body only twenty or thirty yards at most. Still, the idea of actually being beneath the earth was sobering. It would be like swimming down into a bottomless grave.

As I grimly pulled on my dry suit, tanks, and weight belt, I must have come up with a dozen perfectly sound reasons to quit, to get help, to come back another day. But each time I countered it with an image of Ray Calderon, smiling as we talked, looking into my eyes. Something he would never do again. And I knew if his brother was down here, I had to find him. I just had to.

I waded slowly into the river, chest deep, then knelt and double-checked my regulator. Everything was A-okay. I was wearing a double tank, so I had plenty of reserve air. There was no reason to delay, and yet I hesitated. I took a long last look at the sky and the

stunted tree I'd lashed the nylon cable to. And then I sank slowly into the water and let the current take me.

It was like swimming in a mist. The sunlight reflected off the hazy water and set it aglow with a milky fluorescence, limiting visibility to a meter or less. But the light held no warmth, the water was icy, and the chill, steady current seemed to suck life from me. Or maybe it was fear that made me shiver.

I stayed down near the bottom, circling the pool a few feet above the riverbed, scanning the rocks, stumps, forest debris. No algae or reeds grew here, no fish swam. The sulfide made this stretch of river as dead as . . . the boy I was looking for.

But he wasn't there. At least not in the hazy pool. If he was here, he must be farther on, in the darkness of the underworld beneath the hills. I could almost feel the weight of all that soil and stone crouched above the river, ready to collapse again, to form a larger sinkhole. With me beneath it. And I knew if I paused for even a moment now, I'd turn tail and swim for the light.

I didn't. I couldn't. Instead, cursing my luck and my own damned stubbornness, I switched on my helmet lamp and thrust forward into the shadowy mouth of the cave. Into the darkness. And then the earth fell away.

I'd been quartering back and forth across the riverbed, scanning literally almost every inch of it, seeing nothing but debris, stones, and a few river crabs skittering about. The sudden downward slope shouldn't have surprised me; this river had already wreaked major havoc on the land about it. But the development did make me stop to reconsider my situation.

I'd assumed the river flowed beneath the hills more or less in a direct line to the lake, that my search would be restricted to a relatively narrow area. But the riverbed was dropping rapidly now, angling downward and widening out into a huge subterranean pool. A new sinkhole in the making.

My grip tightened involuntarily on my nylon lifeline. In a cavern this large I could no longer trust the current for my sense of direction. If I lost the line I could easily become disoriented and . . . and then I saw James Calderon's corpse.

I should have guessed he was near. I'd been seeing the little river crabs scuttling below me without realizing what it meant. There was no prey for them to hunt down here. Nothing lived here. They could only be eating carrion.

Jimmy'd come to rest on his side in a wide depression in the riverbed, a natural trap. His body was moving, or seemed to be. It was seething with small river crabs, dozens of them, crawling over him and each other. Feeding.

I turned away, my mouth tasting a sudden surge of bile. I forced it down, composing myself, letting the current swing me away from him a little.

I checked my watch, trying to calculate how far I'd come from the cavern mouth. I'd been down eighteen minutes, but I'd been quartering back and forth rather than swimming in a straight line. I wasn't sure how far I'd actually traveled. Thirty to forty yards, maybe more. Too far for me to haul the corpse against the current alone. I'd need help.

Or at least that's what I decided. But even if I couldn't recover the body, I would still have to examine it carefully where it lay to learn what I could about what had happened to him.

Sweet Jesus. I just couldn't. But I had to. There was no one else.

I bit down hard on my mouthpiece, using the pain to focus my concentration. Then I kicked gently and floated slowly back to Jimmy's corpse. The crabs were the worst part, crawling over him like submarine maggots. I couldn't even brush them off without roiling the silt and reducing the little visibility I had. I'd have to look past them.

There was almost nothing left of the boy I'd met. His leather jacket protected his torso, but most of the skin of his hands and face had been chewed away. A few patches of his long dark hair were still attached, waving gently in the current. The rest of his skull was cleaned nearly to the bone, with only odd bits of tendon and gristle still adhering. His eye sockets were empty save for tiny crabs scabbling over each other to get inside.

The cause of death was clear enough. His skull was crushed, fractured front and back by a series of powerful blows. So much for the auto accident theory. The body'd been wrapped in a covering of some sort, dark heavy cloth that trailed off behind it in the current. And there was something familiar about his shroud. The pattern? I couldn't be sure. Something, though.

A single cinder block had been lashed to his legs with thin nylon cord to serve as an anchor . . .

Sash cord. The kind used to draw drapes. That's what Jimmy's shroud was, a section of curtain. In the milky murk, I couldn't be

positive, but I was fairly sure I'd seen the pattern before. In the McClain house.

But he couldn't have been killed there. Both Megan and Audrey had seen him leave. But whoever'd killed him obviously had access to the house. And for a split second I heard Hannah saying she'd been surprised when Audrey said Ross was out. He's always sucking around . . .

Ross. With his dyed hair and sculptured, weightlifter's build.

I needed that curtain. At the very least it would connect Jimmy's murder to the house. Fortunately, the river had already done much of the work for me. The current had tugged most of the material free, trailing it out along the floor of the trench. Only a corner of it was still connected to the body, trapped under the cord. I had my diving knife of course, but I couldn't sever the cord that held the drape without cutting the body loose as well. Damn.

There was no other way. I'd have to pull it free. I hooked the lifeline to my belt, then grasped the torn remains of Jimmy's calf with my left hand and tried to tug the drape from beneath the cord. Instantly the world closed in as the silt roiled up around me. I felt crabs scrabbling across my hands, but the damned drape wouldn't move.

I jerked harder and everything disappeared. Black water. I couldn't see anything at all.

I yanked furiously at the drape, tugging at it like a terrier. And suddenly I felt it give. I inched it from beneath the cord until finally it slipped free. Got it! I released Jimmy's leg, took a firm grasp of my lifeline, and waited for the current to carry away enough of the silt so I could see again.

I was panting, shaking with exhaustion, more from the tension and fear than the effort involved. But gradually I got my breathing under control and the hazy silt slowly cleared away. And I was sorry it did.

My struggle with the drape had rolled Jimmy's body over, and he faced me now, in all his ghastly horror. Lord of the crabs. Beast of black water.

Hell would be like this. I had to get out of here. I wrapped the end of the drape firmly around my wrist and yanked it free of the river bottom. And a second body exploded up at me out of the muck!

I ran! Or tried to. I scrambled frantically across the riverbed, banging off stumps, roiling the silt into a swirling tornado of black water. I forgot to swim, forgot everything in blind panic, fleeing like

the hounds of hell were after me, trying to get away, trying to— I slammed into something in the dark. A boulder? The cavern wall? I couldn't tell. I couldn't see anything but the swirling murk in front of my mask. And I was too afraid to grope, to reach out into the blackness, terrified I might be . . .

Might be what?

Grabbed? Clutched in the rotting arms of a corpse? No, not a corpse. It hadn't been a corpse. It was a . . . skeleton. Bones. Not a ghost or a monster. Just bones.

So it couldn't have lunged at me. I must've pulled it out of the silt with the damned drape. The drape. In my panic, I'd lost it. But it couldn't have gone far. It would be near the . . . bodies. My God. The horror . . .

I closed my eyes, willing myself to calm down, to slow my breathing. Get a grip, girl, get a grip. Settle down.

All right, okay. First of all, where was I? I made myself feel tentatively around the rock I'd banged into. There seemed to be no wall beyond it. So I was still in the riverbed. And if I just sat tight a few minutes the current would carry the silt away and I'd be able to see.

I still had my lifeline. And twenty minutes of air. I was all right for now. No call for a coronary. I'd come down here looking for Jimmy Calderon. And I'd found someone else as well, that's all. A second body. The question was, whose?

Enough of the silt I'd roiled up in my flight had cleared to let me see the river bottom again. So I sucked up every shred of determination I had left and worked my way back across to the bodies.

There wasn't much left of the second corpse. It had fallen to pieces when I'd pulled it up. Many of the smaller bones had simply vanished into the ooze at the bottom of the trench. The skull seemed to be that of an adult, but beyond that I really couldn't tell much, whether it was a man or a woman, how old, or even how tall. Perhaps it could be identified with dental records . . . If I brought the skull out with me.

I didn't like the idea much, but I didn't see any alternative. I felt gently around the base of the skull to see if it was still attached. And something icy crawled over my wrist. I recoiled, gasping. Then made myself try again. And then I saw it.

A strand of chain was tangled in the bones of the rib cage. Instantly recognizable. The older corpse was wearing a dog-tag chain. I traced the narrow wire into the silt with my fingertips and found

the tabs in the mud. They were black in the pale glow of my headlamp, too corroded to be legible, pitted and discolored by the sulfide. An electrochemical bath might restore them. But it really didn't matter. They'd obviously been down here a long time. And I was fairly sure I knew whose they were.

I took a last look at the trench where Jimmy Calderon and the other had come to rest. The drape lay just beyond them, tangled in some debris. Stable for now. The water was still too roiled to see much. I could search it more carefully when we came back to recover the bodies. It was time to go. But I didn't.

I'd done all I could do for now, and God knows it was a terrible place to be. And yet I found myself oddly reluctant to depart. I think I just hated the idea of leaving Jimmy down here in this reeking pit under the earth.

I'd met him only once, briefly, and hadn't liked him much. But God, he didn't deserve to end like this. No one does. I'll be back, I said to no one. I'll get you out. And then I squared myself off with the current and began to work my way upstream.

Moving against the river was harder than I expected. River current is deceptive. You quickly adapt to the constant pressure and get on with what you're doing. And you forget that every moment is a struggle. You unconsciously fight for balance and to maintain your position as the seemingly gentle current leaches away your strength and body heat. It happens so subtly that you don't realize how much energy you've spent until you try to do something simple like swim upstream. It was all I could do to tug myself forward on the line a foot at a time.

It took me roughly ten minutes to make my way back to the mouth of the cave, and seeing the shimmer of diffused sunlight filtering into the milky water ahead was as fine as waking to a sunrise after a nightmare. I broke the surface and swam to the bank, clutched a trailing root, spat out my mouthpiece, and just hung on, head down, panting like a dog.

And when I looked up, Megan Lundy was there. Looking down at me. Her gaze as lifeless as one of her sculptures. She was dressed for running in her faded gray sweat suit and Nike headband. And she was holding an ugly, palm-sized automatic casually at her side. Not pointed at me. Just there.

"Come on," she said. "You can't stay there."

I heaved myself up on the bank. She took a wary step back, but she needn't have worried. I was physically drained and I was wear-

ing nearly a hundred pounds of gear. I unsnapped my tank pack and eased it to the ground. She tossed a pair of handcuffs to me.

"Put these on."

"A womyn in chains?" I said.

"Just do it."

And I did. No alternative. She motioned me up the path with the gun.

"What about my gear?"

"Leave it. You can come back for it later. Let's go."

She followed me up the long earthen ramp to the rim of the hole, keeping a watchful distance between us. "Charlie will never buy another accident," I said. "If something happens—"

"Shut up," she said coolly. "I'm trying to think."

"All I'm saying is—"

"If you don't shut your mouth, I swear I'll kill you, Mitch. I've got nothing to lose at this point."

I couldn't argue with that. But I decided that if she tried to push me over the edge of the hole, I wasn't going down alone, gun or no gun.

But she didn't. At the top she just motioned me toward the old pickup. "You drive," she said. She waited for me to get behind the wheel, then eased onto the seat beside me. I couldn't see the gun anymore. Nor did I have to.

"Where to?" I said, firing up the truck.

"My place, I think," she said. She sounded distant, lost in thought. I dropped the pickup into gear and started down the hill.

We rode in silence for several miles. I tried to catch sight of the gun, but she must have been holding it next to her thigh. With my hands in cuffs I had no chance even to try for it.

"Did you find what you were looking for down there?" she said abruptly. Her voice had changed. It was forceful now. More at ease. As though she'd made a decision. About me? God only knew.

"Yes," I said warily, "I did. More than I was looking for, in fact."

"You mean Walter? He's still there?"

"Sort of."

"I see," she said slowly. "I thought by now . . . Well, I guess it doesn't matter. He was a pig, you know, as sorry a bastard as ever walked the earth."

"What happened?" I asked.

"He found us together," she said quietly. "Audrey and me. In bed. I was just a kid, really, twenty or so. In college. Unsure of my

sexuality. And then I met her at a fund-raiser, and all my questions were answered. She was the first person I ever truly loved. She was married, and pregnant, and it didn't matter. It was an incredibly sweet awakening, for both of us.

"Then Walter burst in on us in the middle of the night. He was on the run, half drunk, terrified. When he found us he went berserk. Attacked Audrey. She tried to get away, fell down the stairs. And I . . . killed him. Stabbed him with a pair of shears. Half a dozen times, probably, I don't know.

"Audrey was badly hurt, bleeding. But she wouldn't let me call an ambulance. She knew what would happen to me if I did. A gay woman, killing her lover's husband? In those days I wouldn't have had a chance. Or now either, for that matter. Not in this part of the country.

"I couldn't drive, so she had to. Up into these hills. To a place she knew. And then all the way back to the house. And only then did she call an ambulance. She told them she'd fallen. And then she made me leave her."

"My God," I said softly.

"She did it for me," she continued, as though I hadn't spoken. "She lost her baby, nearly lost her life, to protect me. She sent me off to school in New York. And I went on to have a career, and she . . . stayed behind in her chair."

"A woman in chains," I said.

"Very perceptive," she said. "I know when you look at her now, the chair is what you see. A frail old woman who's getting drifty, can barely turn her head. But to me, she was everything, *is* everything, my love, my art, everything. So when she called last week, half out of her mind, and said Walter was back—"

"Walter?"

"She was distraught, not making sense. But I heard shouting in the background. I didn't know what to think. I grabbed a golf club, the first thing that came to hand. And I ran down the beach to the McClain house. I could hear him roaring as I ran up the porch steps. God, he even sounded like Walter. He was yelling at her, only an inch from her face. And she was in tears. I hit him from behind with everything I had . . ."

"And killed him?"

"I'm not sure I meant to—I mean, I didn't even know who he was. But seeing him screaming at Audrey like that—I hit him. Hard. And I'd do it again. And then I loaded him into his car, drove him

up into the hills, and pushed him over. And I ran his damned car into the river afterward. And to hell with him."

"And his brother? To hell with him too?"

"No," she said slowly. "I regret what happened to him. I gave him those sketches hoping he'd either get discouraged or stir up the locals enough that someone would drive him off. But he wouldn't quit. I've been running in the hills, keeping track of him from a distance. And when he found the pit I waited for him on the road out of the hills and waved him down."

"And he stopped, because he thought you were a friend. And you shot him," I said. "Just like that."

"No, not just like that!" she snapped. "My God, do you think I wanted any of this! I have a life, my art is *valued* by a great many people. I couldn't just throw it all away over a pig like Walter, or some sniveling little convict. So I did what I had to. To defend myself. And Audrey."

"I guess I follow your logic, as far as it goes," I said evenly. "I'm not sure Ray will find it much comfort. If he lives."

"I said I regret that, and I do. The odd thing is, I think if I'd killed him outright, it wouldn't trouble me as much as what happened."

"Blinding him, you mean?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "To lose your sight. I swear to God, Mitch, I don't see how men do it."

"Do what?"

"Slaughter each other over nothing: politics or territory or religion. Bomb cities, maim children. How can they possibly live with themselves afterwards?"

"You seem to be doing all right."

"Yes," she said quietly. "I suppose I am. Pull in here."

We'd arrived at her home. I parked beside the house. "We're going to walk around back up to the studio," she said. "You first. Please don't do anything stupid."

"What are you going to do with me?" I asked.

"I don't know. I need to think."

She was lying. She'd decided my fate back on the road. I'd heard it in her voice. But she still had the gun. And obviously wasn't afraid to use it. And I was still so exhausted it was all I could manage to climb the spiral staircase up to the deck.

She unlocked the studio, motioned me inside, then moved quickly around the room drawing the drapes. There was a portable phone on a table by the window. She picked it up.

"I'm going to lock you in," she said quietly. "But I'll be where I can see you. Just sit tight. I'll be back in a few minutes." She backed out and closed the door. I heard the lock click shut. Heard her footsteps cross the deck. Then nothing.

Moving as quietly as I could, I frantically searched the studio, first for a weapon, then for the keys to my handcuffs. The weapon was easy, such as it was. I found a bag of golf clubs in a closet and grabbed a putter out of it. No match for a pistol, but better than nothing. But I couldn't find the damned keys. There were chains and manacles everywhere, but no keys.

And then I saw the statue. Ashtoreth? Was that what she called it? But it wasn't. This time I recognized it. It was Audrey. Young and beautiful and pregnant. And suddenly, everything that Megan had told me, and the things she hadn't, crystallized. And I realized what would happen now.

I carefully lifted the corner of the blind and scanned the deck. It was empty. No one in sight. I used the club to smash open the French door and let myself out. I dropped to all fours, crawled to the railing, then carefully peered over the edge.

But there was no need for caution. Her sweat suit was folded neatly on the beach. The gun was lying on it. And Megan was nearly two hundred yards offshore, swimming steadily out toward . . . nothing. The nearest land was the Canadian shore, a hundred and fifty miles away.

"Megan!" I shouted.

She heard me and turned and faced me for a moment, treading water. Then she raised both hands in the air, her fists clenched. A salute? A goodbye? She turned and swam on.

I sprinted down the steps, smashed in her front door, and used the phone to call 911. Then I charged back to the beach, but . . .

There was nothing to see. Thunderclouds were rolling down from the north, roughing up a chop that was already a foot or so high. I didn't need binoculars to know she was gone. There wasn't even a ripple to show where she'd been. The bay stretched away, dark and empty. Black water, all the way to the horizon.

A helicopter picked up Ray Calderon the next day and flew him down to the U of M hospital. He was in surgery for nearly six hours. He's going to live, and he may recover most of the vision in his right eye. I'll go down to visit him in a few days. I hope he'll be able to see me.

Megan left a letter behind which restated, more or less, what she'd told me, and Charlie accepted it at face value and closed the investigation. But we both know it wasn't true. At least not all of it. Megan couldn't have taken Jimmy's body up into the hills in his rental car. She didn't drive.

She may have been able to manage the short trip to the river, a child could do that much. But even if she'd been able to handle the difficult drive into the hills, the little Escort could never have made it over those trails.

Someone else took the body up there. And only one person could have. Audrey. In the van modified for her wheelchair that only she could drive.

Perhaps if Charlie'd checked her van, he would have found bloodstains in it. But he didn't. Because it doesn't matter now.

The night Megan disappeared Audrey had a stroke. Hannah says she's just fading away, drifting into the murky depths of Alzheimer's disease. Soon she'll be in black water. Unable to find her way back.

I still have the Ashtoreth carving I took from Megan's house. I meant to give it to Audrey. It's hers by right. But in her present condition, I'm not sure how she'd react.

No. That's only partly true.

The truth is, there's something about this rude clay figure that haunts me. She's rising from primordial waters, her belly is swollen and her breasts are full. Her eyes seem to meet mine, but they're more implied than real. Her hands are upraised, fists clenched. In a victory salute of ultimate triumph. It was the gesture Megan Lundy made to me from the lake. A goodbye. And a final plea for understanding. Before she turned and swam away into forever.

The carving is deceptively crude, perhaps in homage to the countless Ashtoreth earth goddesses found in tombs all over the world. Or perhaps it's simply unfinished. And now always will be.

The figure isn't physically recognizable as Audrey, but I know it's her. Free of her chair. And her body, and her years. Somehow Megan captured the image of her soul. A woman unchained.

And the truth is, I'm not sure now that I would give it to Audrey or anyone, even if I knew beyond a doubt that it was the right thing to do.

Because aside from my son, newborn, with afterbirth still matted in his hair, the goddess is simply the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. ●

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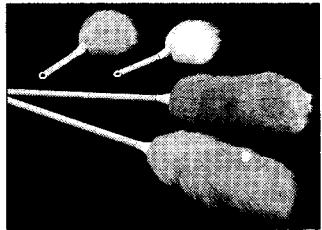


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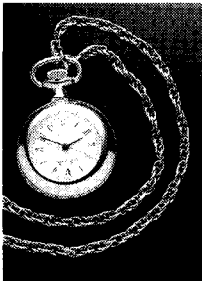
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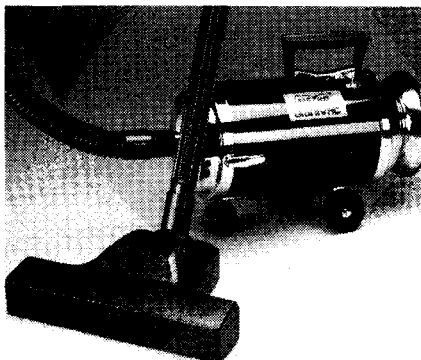
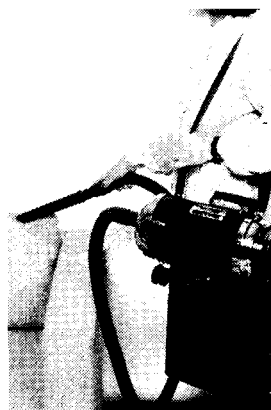
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Originally from New Zealand, Neil Jillett has worked for the Melbourne, Australia newspaper The Age for most of his long career as a journalist. A wide range of assignments for the paper have taken him to many parts of the world, including the Soviet Union during the early days of Gorbachev's regime, Mexico, and the Philippines. Mr. Jillett is currently the film and dance critic for The Age, and when time permits, he writes not only short stories but film scripts and novels. His 1989 novel Copycat was published by Collins, Australia. . . .

SUNSET ON THE PADANG

by **NEIL JILLETT**

“The Chinese adore children,” Mrs. Clayton said as they sat on the padang at sunset.

Helen, who had heard this many times in the past three months, silently amended the old woman's generalisation: *some* Chinese, *some* children.

“Absolutely adore them,” Mrs. Clayton insisted. Without turning, she spoke to the man behind her. “Don't you, Cookie?”

“Beg yours, mem?”

“You heard very well what I said, Cookie.” There was, Mrs. Clayton felt, just the right note of good-humoured exasperation in her voice. She was proud of her repertoire of laughs and other vocal inflections. “He likes to pretend he never listens to conversations,” she said to Helen. “That's a legacy from Alec Preston. He was always accusing poor Cookie of eavesdropping. Wasn't he, Cookie?”

“Beg yours, mem?”

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Mrs. Clayton's laughter this time was merely exasperated. "Alec would clip him over the ear often as not, call him a 'bloody Chink spy.' I can't say I completely blame him." Mrs. Clayton's smile reflected satisfaction, or an affectionate malice, as she imagined the effort the man behind them was making to keep his face expressionless. She and Cookie had been playing this game for years. She lifted the lid of the ice bucket on the folding table. "I think we could do with a refill, Cookie."

"Yes, mem."

As Cookie took the bucket back to the flat, Helen was not tempted to protest at the way Mrs. Clayton ordered him about, even though he was not her servant. As a newcomer to Singapore, Helen was not ready to challenge Mrs. Clayton's belief that only the English knew how to cope with the problems of living in what, several years after national independence, the old woman still called "this colony." And Mrs. Clayton was in many ways a friendly, helpful neighbour. For one thing, she had arranged for Cookie and Amah to stay on with the flat.

Cookie looked about forty, but Helen was sure he was considerably older, though perhaps not so old as his wife, who must be nearly sixty. She was skinny and ugly and quiet. Cookie's face was smooth and chubby and rarely without a smile. His short, sturdy body, with the white cotton trousers flapping around the bare ankles of his bandy legs, seemed to vibrate with eagerness to please as he prepared meals and bossed his wife over the cleaning jobs.

Helen felt it was wrong to address the couple by their occupations rather than their names (which she had difficulty remembering, anyway), but Mrs. Clayton assured her that they had always been known as Cookie and Amah; a change, no matter how well intended, would only upset them.

Now, sipping her gin and tonic, Mrs. Clayton said, "You really couldn't ask for a better servant than Cookie, though he does need to be kept up to the mark in matters of detail. Like making sure we have enough ice."

"I suppose so." Helen was careful not to show the slight irritation she felt. "But most of the time things seem to run smoothly enough, if I leave him to his own devices."

"Oh, he's a treasure in many ways, there's no denying that." Mrs. Clayton signalled the end of the discussion by doing up the top button of her cardigan and saying, "Quite a nip in the air this evening." She looked at the dull glow of barely suppressed sweat on

her young neighbour's face. For all her generous nature, it delighted her that she, a seventy-year-old Englishwoman, endured without complaint a climate that reduced to damp lethargy this young Australian, who had presumably been reared on blistering beaches.

Besides the cardigan over her dress, Mrs. Clayton was wearing sunglasses and a broad-brimmed straw hat, as she did, even indoors, during all daylight hours. They were, she often said, touching the brown spots on her face, "protection against the dreadful ravages of this climate."

Mrs. Clayton, who had worn a hat since she first came to Singapore, nearly fifty years ago, now said, "Of course, it's very much a case of after the horse has bolted . . . I should have started warding off the sun"—she tapped the straw brim—"probably gloves, too, while I still had some peaches and cream left." She did up two more buttons of her cardigan.

Helen, who suspected the blemishes were caused by age rather than the tropical sun, forced herself to help the conversation in the reminiscent direction Mrs. Clayton wanted. "Chilly? It seems hotter than ever to me."

"And it probably is, dear. Just my imagination." Mrs. Clayton was fond of talking about her imagination, and she had treated Helen to this climatic manifestation of it several times. "We're virtually on the equator, I know, but still in the Northern Hemisphere. I like to pretend I can tell one season from the other. Thinking that way reminds me of home." She sighed. "Snow and holly and robin redbreasts. If I imagine hard enough, I really can feel a nip in the air." She shivered and did up another button.

"Mind over matter?" Helen suggested. "I wish I could learn the trick."

They sat in silence for a while, until Mrs. Clayton, alerted by distant shouting and laughter, remembered why she had said that Chinese *adored* children. Although adoration hardly sprang to mind in connection with Helen's boy, the reference to children was Mrs. Clayton's tactful route to a subject that had to be discussed, had to be settled, for this young woman's own good, before it was too late. She sat up in her deck chair and looked across the padang. "I hate to interfere, my dear, but do you really think it's wise to allow the boy, young . . . young—?"

"Jason," his mother said.

"Ah, yes, young Jason." Mrs. Clayton's lips formed a slight smile in which she judged there was no more than a smidgen of criticism.

Such names these Australians gave their children! "As I was saying, do you really think it's wise . . . ?" She left the question hanging.

Helen knew what the old woman meant. There were four blocks of flats overlooking the padang and the swamp reclamation area and the sea beyond. The three-storey buildings had gone up in the 1920s. The flats in three of the blocks had big rooms, old-fashioned but still, more than forty years later, among the island's best accommodation. Most of the flats in these three blocks were occupied by what Mrs. Clayton called "old Singapore hands, people like us." She and her husband, who clung to his position of senior partner in a firm of rubber brokers, had been there twenty-three years, since 1945. But in the pokey flats in the fourth block, which was leased by the British army under the defence agreement with the Singapore government, lived the families of enlisted soldiers, none of them above the rank of sergeant.

"Many of them are probably quite sweet little things," Mrs. Clayton said, referring to the children of the enlisted men, "but the language! I have to force myself to pretend I haven't heard it. And those accents. Before you know it, young . . . young—"

"Jason."

"Yes, Jason. When he speaks so well, it would be such a pity if he started to sound as if he came from some back street in Birmingham."

Although she had to admit it was silly and snobbish, Helen agreed, silently, that this was an unattractive prospect. Jason had been only three months at Raeburn Park, the private school established for the children of the executive and professional members of the island's British community, but already he sounded like a middle-class child in a BBC television serial set in Edwardian England. It had started as mimicry, but had become habitual, or perhaps he just enjoyed the surprise people showed when they found out that he was Australian. He was a tall, handsome nine-year-old, fair-haired and blue-eyed, and the accent suited his looks. He claimed to be unaware of his new voice, and when she joked about how the kids back in Melbourne would react if they heard him, he would reply, "Oh, Mother, don't be a complete idiot," in a thoroughly English way.

Well, perhaps playing with the army children would stop him becoming a prematurely stuffed shirt. And if it kept him from wandering around on the reclamation, as he did so often, in defiance of her orders, and if it stopped him teasing—that was a mild way to

describe his appalling conduct—Cookie and Amah . . .

"It's unfair, I know," Mrs. Clayton was saying, "but even these days—I find it hard to believe we'll soon be into the nineteen seventies—even these days, people are judged by the way they speak, especially if their accent's not all it might be."

"Not quite quite?" Helen said. She liked having an occasional dig at her new friend. She wondered how far she could go, since Mrs. Clayton seemed armour-plated against sarcasm.

"Not quite quite," the old woman echoed. "The nail on the head, exactly." Her eyes, behind the dark glasses, were smug. She enjoyed doing her turn, as she thought of it, being the Old Colonial, the caricature of an English gentlewoman gone a bit dotty from too much tropical sun. Script by Somerset Maugham; lyrics and music (if only she could sing!) by Noel Coward.

She felt an amused affinity with the boy whose name she kept pretending to forget. Jason was a fellow spirit, she thought, at least in the dedication with which he performed his own turn. He made a good job of it. The accent was so patently assumed, yet so right, and his impertinence had a naturalness refined by study and practice into an art. But she suspected there was something genuinely nasty, even rotten, behind his facade of supercilious naughtiness. He was an entertaining child, in small doses; it took an effort to think of him as endearing too. The mock snobbishness of her warnings about his playing with the army children concealed a real concern that a boy like that could easily get into bad company and serious trouble.

"I hope you don't mind my giving you all this advice, my dear," she said. "You must think me such an old busybody."

"Of course you are, Agatha." Helen's laugh sounded to Mrs. Clayton, the connoisseur of laughs, less merrily ironic than perhaps had been intended; but she was determined not to be offended, especially when Helen added, "Where would Colin and I be without your help?" and leant across the table and, negotiating the brim of the straw hat, kissed her cheek. "You've been our saviour."

The family's term in Singapore had threatened to go wrong from the start. Colin, appointed head of his aluminum-ore company's new Southeast Asia sales office, arrived first, to hire clerical staff and arrange somewhere to live. Helen and Jason followed from Melbourne three weeks later, to be greeted by the news that the accommodation deal had fallen through. The British engineer whose house

they were to take over had unexpectedly accepted an extension of his term in Singapore.

"Bloody Poms!" Colin said as he and Helen conferred over drinks beside the pool at the Goodwood Hotel. "I've always said you should never trust them." He could not find another house in a suitable area. There were plenty of flats, but none with gardens where Jason could let off steam. "Bloody Pommies!" he said again. The heat was already getting to him, and he wondered whether accepting this posting, step up though it was, had been a mistake.

"I couldn't help overhearing," said an old woman at a nearby table, "and if you'll excuse a bloody old Pommy for butting in . . ." The laugh that followed, girlish but with a suggestion of distaste for the loudness of Colin's complaint and for the abusive slang term that Australians used for English people, was a refinement of one of the best in her repertoire.

"Sorry about that." Colin blushed, annoyed at having given the old Pommy fart cause to think of him as another crass Australian.

Agatha Clayton gave her most gracious laugh a brief outing, then introduced herself. "I come here every Friday for afternoon tea. One of those little rituals we old Singapore hands go in for. Some people prefer Raffles, but that's pure sentimentality, or nostalgia, I think it's called these days. You can't beat the Goodwood's Black Forest or coffee sponge."

Mrs. Clayton explained that the third-storey flat above hers had just become vacant. "On a clear day you can see Indonesia, or at least the outlying islands, though they're just bumps on the horizon, really. And there's a marvellous padang."

Colin looked puzzled. "Padang?"

"Park, field—paddock, I suppose you Australians would call it. Wonderful for your boy to play in." She smiled at Jason splashing in the Goodwood's pool. "And the Singapore Swimming Club is just five minutes down the road—an even better pool than this one. I'm sure my husband could arrange membership for you." She gave her most subtly ironic laugh. "They still accept *some* white members."

While Helen and Colin smiled politely at the joke, Mrs. Clayton remembered that the servants of the flat's late occupant were hoping to be inherited by the new tenants.

"Fine," Colin said. "We won't have to break them in and show them the ropes. They can do that to us."

Mrs. Clayton laughed, with a touch of grimness, at this suggested reversal of the proper order.

"A built-in babysitter," Helen said. "I can't believe my luck."

"Cookie's a little set in his ways," Mrs. Clayton warned, "and Alec Preston didn't quite keep him up to the mark after dear June died. But I'm sure Cookie will soon adjust to *your* preferences." She gave another slightly grim laugh, which trailed off as she smiled at the boy. "And, of course, the Chinese adore children."

"Just as well," Helen said. "Jason can be a handful."

"Jason," said Mrs. Clayton, sampling the name as if it were a recent addition to the Goodwood's cake menu. "How very unusual."

"We've got so much to thank you for, Agatha," Helen said three months later as they sat on the padang.

Behind the two women Cookie gave what Helen thought of as his discreet-butler cough. He and Amah had a television set in their room, and the noises that came from there indicated that in the evenings they watched Hong Kong martial-arts films. But Helen suspected that he sometimes tuned in to a series based on P. G. Wodehouse's stories. There was something so Jeeves-like in the cough with which he sought her attention.

"Yes, Cookie?"

"Dinner, mem?"

Helen looked at her watch. "Right, Cookie, and on your way in, please tell Jason to go with you. It's time for his shower."

She sensed a tension in Cookie as he accepted this order. Any mention of Jason these days seemed to put him on edge, hardly surprising in view of the boy's increasingly malicious behaviour—such as giggling as he tracked dirt through the flat just after the floors had been washed. Helen felt like telling Cookie not to bother, that she would round up Jason herself. But what was the point, as Agatha often said, of having servants if you didn't let them do the work? As a placatory gesture, she put the drinks tray on the grass and said, "If you'll just take the table, Mrs. Clayton and I can bring in the other things, Cookie."

As Cookie walked away, Mrs. Clayton said, "Alec Preston and I often used to sit out here in the evenings with our G and Ts, though with Alec, of course, it was far more G than T." She held up her glass, as if studying the slice of lemon that floated in it. "As a matter of fact, he died while we were having a drink. Oh, not in that one," she added quickly when Helen moved uncomfortably in the deck chair she had taken over with Cookie and Amah and the lease of

Alec Preston's flat. "We burnt the one Alec died in. It seemed the right thing to do."

Helen wondered how much more Mrs. Clayton was going to say about their predecessor in Flat No. 7. The old woman barely mentioned Alec Preston.

"Alec and June were rather like Basil and me, Darby and Joan basking in empire's sunset," Mrs. Clayton said. "No children to call them back to England, no friends there either. We talked of going back home, of finding adjoining cottages in the Cotswolds, pottering through our last days amid hollyhocks and honeysuckle. But we knew it was just a dream. We'd been here so long it was the only place we'd be happy, while we could still totter around under our own power. The four of us were together for ages. Basil and Alec were clerks with Jardine's, we had a double wedding, we survived the Japs together, and after that Basil and Alec set up their own firm."

Mrs. Clayton fumbled ice into her glass with thin, veined fingers. "June and I established the ritual—the tradition, if you like—of sitting out here, on the padang, at sunset. Very rarely with our dear old boys. They'd go off to the club for an hour after work. Basil still does. That's part of the trick of successful Darby-and-Joanism: don't be in each other's hair all the time. But when June died all the spirit went out of Alec." Mrs. Clayton chuckled affectionately. "Or perhaps I should say a lot more spirit went into him. To be frank, he was an alcoholic. Perhaps you think it was foolish of me to encourage him, to sit out here drinking with him?"

"More a kindness," Helen said, "at that age, if he was beyond redemption."

"That's exactly how I thought of it, my dear. He did manage to keep it within bounds, usually. A steady soaking, rather than binges, though sometimes, late at night, he'd keep drinking, get his second wind and become very noisy, and give poor Cookie a terrible time when he tried to get him to bed. Cookie was an angel the way he put up with it."

He probably recalls it as an ideal existence compared with the hell Jason's making of his life, Helen thought. I'll be lucky if he and Amah don't give notice tomorrow. That alarming possibility prompted her to ask Mrs. Clayton, "Couldn't he and Amah have got work with someone else?"

"Perhaps. Probably." Mrs. Clayton detected the anxiety behind the question and supposed that the boy had been up to some of his

tricks—but servants expected that sort of thing, and of course, being Chinese, they adored children. “It takes a lot to make servants leave, especially when they’re as well paid as yours are.” (Mrs. Clayton had helped Helen to fix their wages.) “Anyway, Alec was really very good to them, apart from the odd slap and abuse. When June died he didn’t need two servants, but he kept them on. They’d been with him for years, and they’d have found it hard adjusting to new people, a new place, new routines.”

“They’ve adjusted to us, or so I like to think,” Helen said.

“But mainly on their own terms, I suspect, not that there’s much harm in that.” Mrs. Clayton’s gentle laugh suggested that Helen was easier with the servants than she should be, for her own good or theirs. “But thank heavens Cookie’s still around. I enjoy these evenings out here, with him making sure our glasses are filled, when he remembers. It wouldn’t be the same at all with my two.” Mrs. Clayton’s servants were a pair of middle-aged sisters. “Docile and efficient, but no idea of how to put a good G and T together.”

Behind them, Cookie gave his discreet-butler cough, sharpened with a touch of urgency. Helen turned around. “Yes, Cookie?”

“Jason say no come in. He go there.”

As Cookie pointed seaward, Helen stood up. She could see Jason’s fair hair glinting in the sun’s last rays as he ran among the piles of sand and mud.

“The times I’ve told him he mustn’t go out on the reclamation!”

“I keep say wash-time. Jason keep say no.”

“All right, Cookie. I’ll get him.”

Helen walked quickly across the padang, then down the steps by the sea wall, calling to her son. Mrs. Clayton winced slightly. The dear girl had quite a pleasant voice, for an Australian, most of the time, but anger and volume made it strident. “Jason! Jason!”

That boy’s going to cause real trouble one day, Mrs. Clayton told herself as she finished her G and T.

Three days later, at sunset on the padang, Helen said, “Thank God Colin will be back from Taiwan at the end of the week. I wish his job didn’t keep him away so much. Jason needs a father’s hand, or at least I hope that’s all it is. He’s been nothing but trouble since we came here. He did have his naughty outbursts in Melbourne, but nothing like this. Otherwise I might think he was autistic.”

“Always a possibility,” said Mrs. Clayton, to whom this word was new. “Perhaps,” she added, with the facile wisdom of the childless,

"all he needs is time to adjust to his new surroundings."

"He's adjusted well enough. He couldn't be happier. But the rest of us have to pay the price." Helen sighed. "His bike's the latest problem."

"He does seem to be having fun with it," Mrs. Clayton said in a carefully neutral voice. Jason had almost knocked her down twice. He had said "sorry," but she suspected there had been more calculation than accident in those near-collisions. His impertinence, now so outrageously overplayed, no longer amused her. Old and a bit silly though she might be, she could still tell a proper apology from one delivered with a smirk and more than a hint that she'd better watch out, or she might get really hurt next time. But she wasn't about to add to this poor girl's troubles by mentioning that now. "The way he goes whizzing around the padang!" she said.

"And out on the street."

"Oh dear, in all that traffic. You must put a stop to that."

"I put a lock on the bike, but he picked the lock. I let the air out of the tyres and took the screws off the valves, but he bought new ones. I'll just have to get rid of it. And that will be his excuse to find some other trouble to get into. On the reclamation, probably."

The reclamation stretched for a few hundred yards from the sea wall at the edge of the padang. Rock and earth quarried from Singapore's few hills, and sand dredged from the sea, were being used to extend the island, creating new land for freeways, factories, and another airport.

"I don't know why it's not fenced off," Helen complained.

"Such a big area, that would be terribly expensive, and I'm sure it's not really dangerous, not when there hasn't been rain for so long."

"Then why have they put up a notice warning that it is?"

Mrs. Clayton, unable to argue with that, attempted a change of subject, at the risk of moving into even more contentious territory. "An only child. Perhaps . . . ?"

"Oh, we tried. Had three miscarriages before our doctor advised against it."

"My dear, I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

"Nothing to forgive." Helen patted the old woman's hand. "It used to upset me, but not now." She said harshly, "There's no guaranteeing it would have been a sweet little girl, and I don't think I could have coped with another one like Jason."

"I don't want to tell tales," Mrs. Clayton said, pointing to the reclamation, "but there he goes again."

That night at dinner Jason contrived to upset his food on the floor. Helen had wanted to lock him in his room without dinner as punishment for going out on the reclamation and for teasing and abusing Cookie and Amah as they prepared the meal; but the effort of disciplining him threatened to bring on more tantrums, and she knew she was beyond coping with them. This ruined meal was her reward for leniency.

"You did that on purpose!" she shouted as he looked with satisfaction at the mess of food and broken china on the tiles and carpet. "Clean it up."

"Oh, Mother, don't be such an idiot," he drawled. "Why do you think they have servants in this country?"

Cookie returned from the kitchen, where he had gone to summon Amah to bring a bucket and cloth.

"Please leave it," Helen said. "I'll do it. Or Jason will."

But Cookie held out her chair until she sat down again. This weak-willed woman could never make her child obey her, and it was beneath his dignity to allow an employer to do work that should be done only by his wife.

Jason grinned as Amah cleaned up the mess and Cookie served him with more food.

"Stop that!" Helen wanted to slap him, but had a dreadful feeling that he might slap her back. "Go to your room."

"Oh, Mother, really," her son said, staying put.

Later, shouting to make himself heard over the heavy rain, Cookie told his wife, "Either that little bastard goes or we do."

"Don't be a fool," Amah said, looking up from ironing one of the little bastard's shirts. "He stays. Australians don't like sending their children home to boarding school, not at that age."

"Ah." Cookie could still be surprised by the range of information that his wife had picked up from gossiping with other servants over the years. "Then we must go."

"Where? There are too many servants looking for work as it is, and younger than us."

"Taking care of that drunk Preston was bad enough, but otherwise it was an easy berth, and there weren't the insults, day by day, and from a child. Perhaps . . ." Cookie went on to explain how his cousin

had a friend who knew someone in one of the tongs who for a fee would commit unmentionable crimes. "He could fix the little demon, permanently."

"Oh, stop dreaming," Amah said. "We couldn't afford it, for one thing. And if anything happened to him, who would be the first suspected? Chinese may be running this silly little country now, but it's always people like us who are blamed for everything."

"I still think—"

"If you have nothing sensible to say, keep quiet and let me get on with my work."

After school the next day, Jason agreed without fuss to stay inside. "I've got a book I'm supposed to read for homework," he said, and went to his room. He was still there when Helen looked in, before going out for drinks on the padang with Mrs. Clayton.

An hour later she asked Cookie to tell Jason to have his shower. "I don't think you'll have any trouble with him. He seems to have turned over a new leaf."

Cookie was not sure what this meant, but he felt no reason to share the optimism he detected in her voice. Five minutes later he was back, coughing discreetly.

"Yes, Cookie?"

"Jason gone, mem."

"The little horror. On his bike, I suppose? I knew I should have got rid of it."

"Bike not gone, mem."

"Oh, not the reclamation!" Helen moaned at the nuisance of having to go hunting out there for him again. Then she remembered the previous night's rain. "It'll be a swamp!"

"Now don't fret," Mrs. Clayton said. "I'm sure he's perfectly all right."

"You take that side," Helen pushed Cookie in the direction of the far end of the sea wall. "I'll go this way." She started to run, then turned back to Mrs. Clayton. "The police? Do you think we should call the police?"

"Leave it to me," Mrs. Clayton said, having no idea what she was supposed to tell the police. "I'm sure there's no need to panic."

Jason was terrified when he fell into the mud. Floundering wildly, he quickly sank up to his waist; but he had the sense to keep his hands above his head, and when the mud reached halfway up his

chest he found that his feet were on firm ground. He stopped struggling. The mud felt quite pleasant as it slid inside his shirt and pants. He even moved, cautiously testing with his feet, farther away from the hard edge of the swamp, to make it more of a nuisance for those who would have to fish him out. He had no doubt that he could climb free by himself, but he preferred a dramatic rescue.

He had been too shocked to scream at first, and he didn't scream now. He'd probably been missed by this time, and he liked the idea of people wandering in search of him, among the maze of hillocks where the mud and sand was piled. Why let them know, by shouting, where he was, when it would be much more fun to spin things out? The sun would soon be gone, though, and he didn't like the thought of being here alone in the dark. He decided to count up to 350, slowly, then start yelling.

He had reached 188 when Cookie appeared from behind one of the hillocks. He smiled at Jason.

"Help me, Cookie."

Cookie, summing up the situation, did not move for almost a minute. He saw that the boy was safe, not struggling or sinking. Cookie moved forward slowly and stopped when his feet began to sink. He squatted and extended his arm, leaning his whole body towards the boy.

Something in the coldness of the man's eyes warned Jason. He saw that the curve of his mouth was more a grimace than a smile; the angle of the hand suggested revenge, not rescue. Jason summoned his body into a violent effort, grabbing the hand with both his own. Cookie fell forward. His face hit the mud close to Jason's head. Jason grasped the collar of Cookie's shirt and began to climb out, using the desperately heaving body as a ladder. He did not hurry as he felt Cookie's head and shoulders sinking under his sandals. The body, with the head and the top of the torso well down in the mud, was hardly moving by the time Jason was back on firm ground. For another minute, he watched as Cookie's feet flopped weakly, seeking a leverage that wasn't there. When there was no more movement, Jason, screaming for help, ran to find his mother.

Five minutes later, on the darkening padang, Helen clutched her trembling son in her arms.

"Oh, Mother, Mother." Jason knew that, even dampened by false sobs, his accent was more sharply English than ever as he spoke the rehearsed words: "Oh, Mother, that brave man gave his own life to save mine."●

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With the explosion of gambling on Indian reservations and in states that previously disallowed it, crime associated with the gaming business is bound to be depicted more frequently in fiction through the rest of this decade. If anyone has his finger on the pulse of crime trends, it's Edward D. Hoch, whose latest caper for Nick Velvet has the lovable thief behind the scenes of riverboat gambling—another popular new venue for the casino crowd . . .

THE THEFT OF TWENTY-NINE MINUTES

by **EDWARD D. HOCH**

This was the final gasp of Mardi Gras and the streets of New Orleans were jammed with costumed revelers. Nick Velvet moved among them unnoticed, even though he wore a fringed cowboy shirt and large white hat, with two guns belted to his waist. He felt a certain invincibility in the carnival crowd, where only the worst of crimes brought forth any police response.

Before long he spotted his target, slipping off one of the elaborate parade floats and ducking into a hotel lobby. Nick followed along, pushing past a bottleneck of veiled harem girls. He glimpsed the man in the skeleton costume just entering the men's room off the bar. Nick stepped inside, waited an instant while a fat man in a tuxedo departed on his way back to the hotel ballroom. Otherwise he was alone with the skeleton. The man had pushed the mask up on his forehead as he moved to the sink and began washing his hands.

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Nick drew one of his pistols and said, "Raise your hands. This is a robbery."

The man looked at him and laughed. "What?"

"The gun is real. Give me your mask."

"Are you crazy, mister?"

Nick poked the man's stomach with the barrel of his six-shooter. "Give me the mask or I'll ventilate you, partner."

The man quickly slipped the skull mask from his head and handed it over. "Don't shoot! Here it is."

"Thanks. Now finish washing your hands and take your time about it. If you come running after me it might not be so good." Then Nick was gone, out the door and across the crowded lobby to the street.

An hour later, in a hotel across town, he handed over the mask to the woman who'd hired him. "Here it is, one skull mask."

She smiled as she opened the plastic bag and checked it out. "Any trouble?"

"No."

"Good. Here's the balance of your money. It was a pleasure to work with you, Mr. Velvet."

"The pleasure was mutual."

He left the hotel room and counted quickly through the money as he waited in the empty hallway for the elevator. It had been one of the smoothest assignments he'd ever carried out. If they were all that easy—

A stocky man with graying hair had come out of one of the other rooms and was walking toward him down the hall. Nick felt a moment of panic as he sensed something familiar about the man, something from way in the past. "Hello, Nick," the man said as he reached him. "Nice to see you again."

"I think you must be mistaken. My name's Dave."

The man grinned. "Don't recognize me, do you? Too many years since our last meeting. I'm Charlie Weston—Lieutenant Weston to you."

The memories came flooding back. First New York, where Weston had been with the 17th Precinct, then a slower-paced New England police force in Eastbridge, Massachusetts, near Plymouth. Nick had stolen some letters from a sign there, and tangled with Weston again after that, but he hadn't thought about the man in years. "You're looking older, Charlie. I didn't recognize you."

"We're all looking older, but I spotted you right off."

"You with the New Orleans Police Department?"

"Yeah. Still a lieutenant, but the weather's better down here. I'm too old for all that New England snow."

The elevator chimed and its doors slid open but Weston placed a restraining hand on Nick's arm. "Come down to my room for a few minutes and we'll talk about old times."

"Do I have a choice?"

"No," Weston said with a chuckle. "You always were a smart boy. I won't keep you long."

They went back down to the room as Nick began to wonder what a New Orleans detective lieutenant was doing with a downtown hotel room in the first place. The room was identical to the one Nick's client occupied a few doors away. Nick settled into a chair and waited for Charlie Weston to start talking. When he did speak, his words couldn't have surprised Nick more. "I want you to steal something for me."

"Come on, Charlie." Nick tried to laugh, growing more apprehensive by the second. "I haven't done that sort of thing in years!"

"No? Then you can hand over the money in your pocket. Let's stop kidding around, Nick. I arranged for you to come here, but that other business was just a blind. I need you for something important."

Nick studied the lined face opposite him, trying to read something into those half-remembered features. "All right," he said at last, realizing he was in a trap even if he didn't quite understand the nature of it. "What did you want stolen?"

"Time. Twenty-nine minutes of time."

"Time! How does anyone steal time?"

"That's for you to figure out. I want twenty-nine minutes stolen from the five hundred or so customers and employees aboard a gambling ship docked on Lake Pontchartrain."

"It can't be done," Nick said immediately. "At least not by me. I only steal objects of no value. Certainly you must know that time is money, as Benjamin Franklin and others have told us."

Weston uttered a curse. "We're not playing games, Velvet. If you refuse to help me, I'll arrest you on the spot for stealing that man's mask. The victim and the woman who hired you are both prepared to testify."

"So it was all set up in advance. Tell me, what's the sentence for stealing a two-dollar Halloween mask in New Orleans?"

"Enough to make you regret it. Our judges don't like you Northern criminals importing your crimes into Louisiana."

"I can remember when you were a Northerner yourself, Lieutenant."

"What's your decision?"

"All right," Nick said with a sigh. "How much are you paying me?"

"You have half of twenty-five thousand in your pocket right now, and you already received the other half."

Nick Velvet smiled and shook his head. "No, we start fresh. Another twenty-five or it's no deal."

"All right, but after you do it."

"I'll need money for supplies in advance. The only way you can steal twenty-nine minutes from a boatload of people is to drug them, and that—"

"No drugs."

"What?"

"No drugs. When I say twenty-nine minutes I mean exactly twenty-nine minutes, not twenty-seven or thirty-one. Any sort of drug you could give to five hundred people would be too variable in its effects."

"I don't know how it could be done without drugs."

"That's what I'm paying you for."

"When is this to take place?"

"It must be this coming Friday night, the eighteenth."

"That doesn't give me much time. Seventy-two hours."

"I've seen you work. You can do it."

"May I ask why you need this done?"

"No."

"Is it police business or something private?"

"That's not your concern."

"All right. Tell me about this gambling ship."

"It's one of two anchored on the lake, just north of the city. The other is quite legal but there's a question about the *Cajan Queen* that's being argued in the courts right now. They claim they're not technically a gambling ship because the gambling only follows a full evening's entertainment including dinner and a stage show. And the ship is designed to look like an old Mississippi riverboat. But that needn't concern you. Take a look at the place tomorrow night and figure out how you're going to do it."

"By Friday."

Charlie Weston nodded. "It must be Friday, or I'll have you in a jail cell before you know what's happening to you."

* * *

The first thing Nick did when he reached his hotel room was to phone Gloria at home and tell her what had happened. "Nick, you're in trouble," she decided when he'd finished talking. "How can we get you out of this?"

"He'll probably have someone tailing me, so I have to go through the motions. That's what I'm calling about. Could you fly down here in the morning and help me out?"

"What do you need?"

"I want to visit the *Cajan Queen* tomorrow night, have dinner, take in the show, and do a little gambling. Then I'll know better what has to be done."

"I'll catch the first plane," she promised.

Seeing her come off the jetway shortly before noon the next day, Nick was reminded once more why he'd stayed with Gloria all those years, even without a marriage license. Her hair was starting to gray now, and she refused to color it, but there was still the sense of ironic good humor about her. She viewed all of life as an amusement, one designed especially for her, and Nick was the greatest amusement of them all. She was probably the only sort of woman with whom he could ever have been content.

"Have a good flight?" he asked, giving her a quick impersonal kiss.

"It was smooth, I think. I dozed most of the way."

"You're not used to getting up early."

"I guess not. What's this place we're going to tonight?"

"A gambling ship docked on Lake Pontchartrain, just north of the city. Only they don't advertise the gambling. They simply call it the complete experience, like a theme park or something."

That evening, having phoned for reservations and been told they must arrive promptly at seven, Nick and Gloria set out for the ship. It was actually on the north side of the lake, across a twenty-nine-mile-long toll causeway, and Nick entertained Gloria on the way with bits of knowledge he'd picked up during his stay. "It isn't really a lake at all. If you look on a map you can see it's a shallow extension of the Gulf of Mexico."

"Is it legal to have gambling ships here?"

"The state approved one of them, and they're building a huge casino in New Orleans. The *Cajan Queen* is another matter. A man named Roster owns and operates it. He claims he's competing with organized crime, running the only honest games in the Southeast.

The state's trying to close him down but it's not that easy."

"You got all that from Lieutenant Weston?"

"Most of it."

"What's his angle with these twenty-nine minutes?"

"I don't know," Nick admitted.

He turned the rented car off the north end of the causeway and they headed for the brightly lit old-time riverboat anchored next to a large parking lot that was already almost full. Nick had to admit the whole thing was quite an operation. They were met at the top of the gangplank by an attractive young woman in a gold-braided naval uniform who delivered her welcoming lines with feeling. "Welcome aboard the *Cajan Queen*! Is this your first time with us?"

"Yes, it is," Gloria told her.

"It's so nice to greet new friends. If you'll proceed through those doors to the dining room, dinner is ready to be served. After that you're invited to our hour-long stage show in the ship's theater. Then you'll have three hours to wander among the gaming tables if you desire. We close promptly at midnight."

"Thank you," Nick told her.

"Have a wonderful evening!"

The food, with a choice of three entrees, was in the manner of pre-cooked airline meals. Judged by those standards it was pretty good and certainly reasonably priced. The food and the show were obviously designed to lure customers to the gambling later on. It wasn't exactly Las Vegas or Atlantic City, but Nick guessed from the full dining room that they were doing well. The show consisted of a couple of forgettable comic acrobats. No one complained that it lasted only a bit over thirty minutes. By that time they were anxious to get to the gaming tables and slot machines.

"They're making a ton of money here," Gloria commented later in the evening, joining Nick with a paper cup brimming with quarters.

Before he could reply he spotted Lieutenant Weston moving down the aisle toward them. He introduced Gloria and commented on the size of the crowd. "It's like this every night," Weston assured him. "Got any ideas?"

"Just one. I'd like to meet your friend Roster, the owner."

"He's not exactly my friend," Weston said, letting his eyes scan the room. "He's always here by midnight to cash up, but sometimes he arrives late— No, there he is, by the roulette table. Come along."

Abe Roster proved to be a slender, dark-haired man with sharp features and a smooth manner of talking. He stared at Nick Velvet

as if trying to memorize every detail of his face, paying scant attention to Gloria. "You're a friend of Weston's?" he asked, trying to confirm the relationship.

"An acquaintance. Actually I'm a professional magician." Gloria raised an eyebrow but said nothing. "Nicholas the Great. I'd like a chance to try out my act for you. It would be a big improvement over the acrobats."

"A magician." He glanced now at Gloria. "What do you do—saw the little lady in half?"

"It's much more original than that. Let me try it on Friday night. I'll perform free, as an audition. If you like the act we'll talk about a contract."

Abe Roster rested his hand on Nick's shoulder. "Look, friend, I know the show's not the greatest. Neither is the food. It's the gambling people come for, but I've got legal problems. The rest of it is thrown in to keep the politicians happy."

"Still, it wouldn't cost you anything to give me a try."

The slender man squinted at Nick. "Nicholas the Great, huh? Lots of cute girls in tights?"

"A few."

He turned away, then turned back again at once. "All right, I'll go for one night, a free audition. Impress me and we'll see about more appearances. Tell my stage manager what you'll need as far as props, lighting, and rehearsal time go."

"Thank you, Mr. Roster. You won't regret it."

"I hope not. If you're a friend of Weston's I guess you're all right. One thing to remember—we bill the show as running an hour, but keep it short. I want them on the gaming deck with their money."

"Don't worry," Nick told him.

He walked away and Gloria tugged at Nick's sleeve. "What's all this about a magic act?"

"How else am I going to steal twenty-nine minutes, except by magic?"

Friday was already almost upon them, and Gloria got the assignment of hiring four girls and renting costumes for the act. Nick spent all day Thursday on the riverboat, going over his act with the stage manager. He was a sandy-haired young man named Dominick Powell, and as he listened to Nick he simply scratched his head. "I don't know. I never heard of anything like this."

"That's why I do it, because it's original. When I was a kid I saw a magician borrow a watch from a member of the audience, wrap it in a handkerchief, and smash it with a hammer. Then his assistant brought out a loaf of bread on a tray. He unwrapped the bread and there was a live rabbit inside the loaf. On a ribbon around the rabbit's neck was the watch the magician had borrowed. I never forgot that trick."

"But you're talking about a much bigger trick."

"I hope so. This is the nineteen nineties. Everything's bigger!"

"Gambling sure is. I never thought they'd have it all over the country with casinos on Indian reservations and riverboats, with lottery tickets sold out of machines at the supermarket and new states jumping on the bandwagon about every month. There's too much organized crime getting involved, though. An honest man like Abe Roster doesn't stand much of a chance."

"What do you mean?"

Powell shrugged. "He's been offered money for this place, but he keeps turning it down. Billy Burdeck told him his time is running out."

"Who's Billy Burdeck?"

"You must be new to the Gulf Coast. Burdeck controls most of the important gambling between here and Florida. He wants Abe out, one way or another."

"Well, all that business doesn't concern me," Nick told him. "Let's get on to the lighting for my act."

Later Nick strolled around the ship, noting especially the lack of clocks on board. Casino operators never liked to remind gamblers of the time. What few clocks there were, in offices and employee locker rooms, would be controlled by a central clock, probably on the ship's bridge.

As he was coming down the gangplank in the late afternoon he saw Lieutenant Weston sitting in an unmarked police car waiting for him. "Get in, Nick. We have some things to talk over."

He slid into the front seat next to the detective. "Everything's on target for tomorrow night."

"Tell me how you're going to do it, how you're going to steal the twenty-nine minutes."

"Let it be a surprise," Nick told him with a smile.

"You were talking before about drugging them, knocking everyone out. That'll never do."

"I understand that. It'll be something else."

"See, here's the point," the detective began, frowning as he tried to get his thoughts across in the fewest possible words. "The time has to be taken away from them, from everyone on the boat. The idea of drugging people removes them from the time, which continues as usual. I don't want that."

"That's pretty deep philosophy, but I guess I understand what you're saying. If I'm successful I'll be stealing the twenty-nine minutes from them and from the *Cajan Queen* itself."

"Exactly! That's what I want."

"I need money for expenses."

Weston handed over an envelope. "That should cover it."

"The police down here must pay better than up north," Nick observed, glancing inside the envelope.

"Don't ask questions." Nick started to leave the car. "And be careful. I don't want anything happening to you before tomorrow night."

Back at their hotel Gloria reported on her activities. "I've hired four models for tomorrow night. One of them even worked on the *Cajan Queen* before, so she's perfect. They've been fitted for their costumes and they know what to do. A dress rehearsal tomorrow afternoon should top it off. How about you?"

"The lighting is set. I'll pick up a few props in the morning. Charlie Weston's getting edgy. I wish I knew what was going on."

"Edgy in what way?"

"He warned me to be careful."

"I suppose Abe Roster wouldn't be too happy if he discovered we were trying to pull this off."

"I don't know if it's Abe he's worried about. My problem is that I don't know if Charlie Weston is an honest cop or a crook. A long time ago when I knew him he was honest. Now I'm not so sure. When you talk about stealing twenty-nine minutes from the patrons of a casino the first thing that comes to mind is a robbery. That's just about how long it would take for a gang to hold up the place and make off with all the cash."

"But he told you he didn't want them knocked out. If he was planning a robbery that's exactly what he would want."

"Let's see what happens at tomorrow's rehearsal."

Gloria chuckled. "Nicky, the master magician!"

"It may be the start of a whole new career!" he told her with a grin.

In the morning he rented a tuxedo, a cape, and a top hat for the show, then made the rounds of certain other suppliers for some needed equipment. After lunch, with Gloria and the four costumed assistants on the stage, he went through an outline of the show. The auditorium itself ran between two decks of the *Cajan Queen*, with guests entering from the dining room on the upper level, walking down to take their seats for the show, and then exiting at the front directly into the gaming rooms. There was seating for four hundred and seventy-five, but Nick had been told the reservations for that evening totaled just four hundred seventy-two. In addition, the casino workers, chefs, waiters, security guards, and other employees added up to forty-five people. Most of the waiters and waitresses doubled in the casino after the dinner hour, using the show time to clean up and change their uniforms.

The four girls, Bonnie, Clair, Theresa, and Kimberly, were all attractive. Gloria's choice of costumes was perfect, with sequins and legs notably on view. Nick showed them the claim checks they'd be using and explained what to do.

"You go up each of the aisles collecting every watch and clock in the audience. You rip the claim checks on the perforations, give this half to the audience member and stick the other half on the watch. They're self-adhesive and peel right off after you return the watches at the end of the trick. You put the watches in these bags."

Gloria had her doubts. "You're not going to get every one. Some people simply won't part with a valuable watch for a magic trick."

"It doesn't matter, so long as we get most of them. And I think we will. If my patter is convincing enough, ninety percent of those people will surrender their timepieces."

"Then what?"

"Once we get the bags backstage you take out the watches and set them all ahead twenty-nine minutes."

"Four hundred watches?"

"There'll be four hundred seventy-two in tonight's audience, or maybe a few less with no-shows. Figure about four hundred watches. The girls will help you when they're not on stage. We get the watches at the beginning and then do our other tricks while you're changing them. When the watches are all changed you signal me for the finale. Regular analog watches will go fast, five seconds each at most. Some people still wear digitals and they'll take a bit longer, maybe ten seconds. Figure you'll do about ten a minute, per person. There'll be at least three of you working on it all the time—thirty

watches a minute. With luck they'll be finished in fifteen minutes, but we can risk twenty if necessary. Five minutes at the beginning to collect the watches, five minutes at the end to return them. We're off the stage in thirty minutes. With the missing twenty-nine minutes they'll think they got an hour's show and they'll be ready to gamble."

Gloria wasn't so sure. "I'd know the difference between a half-hour and an hour."

"These people will have eaten a meal, had a few drinks. We'll keep the stage show moving fast, so time seems to be passing. If they're in doubt they'll find a clock somewhere and confirm that an hour has passed. That won't be easy, though. In keeping with the old casino tradition there are no wall clocks in the gaming rooms. And you'll notice there are none here in the auditorium."

"How will you change the others?"

"They're controlled by a master clock on the ship's bridge. I'll do it just before the show starts."

"Many of the employees will have watches."

"I'll take care of that," Nick told her. "Now let's get on with the rehearsal. Remember, girls, we have to move fast on everything. Lots of tricks. We're doing an hour's show in thirty minutes."

Most of the tricks were simple things with cards and flowers and a pair of doves. One involved linking rings, an old favorite with magicians. Nick had known a few and had learned the others from a magic book. His performance wouldn't win any prizes, but he didn't need prizes. He only needed to keep things moving for thirty minutes.

They ran through the entire show twice, cuing the lighting and even giving Gloria and the girls some practice at quickly resetting the time on various types of watches. Shortly after five o'clock, Nick was finally satisfied that they were ready. The six of them left the ship and went off to eat at a nearby restaurant. The four assistants had slipped coats over their costumes so they wouldn't have to change again. Nick soon discovered that Clair was the most outgoing and knowledgeable of the four girls. Just nineteen, she'd worked as a dancer in a show on the *Cajan Queen* over the Christmas holidays and even knew Abe Roster.

"Actually you could put on almost anything and the audience would be satisfied," she told them. "They're on board to eat, drink, and gamble. Mr. Roster puts on the show because it looks good in

the ads, and it gives some of the dining-room staff time to change into their casino outfits."

"Midnight seems awfully early to close," Nick said.

"He's trying to get the hours extended, but it's tough. The whole operation violates the spirit of the gaming laws. He's in trouble with the authorities and the other gambling ship—the legal one—that operates on the lake. Not to mention Billy Burdeck's goons, who just want him out of business."

Nick nodded. "The gambling boss. Someone else mentioned him too. Tell me, Clair, just what is the procedure on board the *Cajan Queen* when it closes?"

She shrugged, thinking about it. "First they shut down the tables and machines and clear everyone out. They figure about fifteen minutes to empty the ship of customers. Then the money is taken to the cashier's office to be counted. The employees are all gone in another ten minutes and Abe Roster and his cashiers count up before locking the money in the safe overnight. An armored car picks it up in the morning." She grinned at him. "Thinking of robbing the place?"

"No, I just do what I'm paid for."

By six-thirty cars were beginning to arrive in the parking lot. Though they still had ninety minutes before show time, Gloria suggested they start back to the riverboat. Nick left them to ready things for the show while he made his way up to the ship's bridge. Since the *Cajan Queen* never left its dock, there was no need to have crew members on the bridge. It was unoccupied now as Nick entered and checked on the clock. He saw at once that it would be a simple task to push it ahead by twenty-nine minutes, changing the other clocks as well.

By the time he heard the slight sound of the opening door behind him, it was too late to hide. He turned and looked into the cold gray eyes of Abe Roster, holding a 9-mm automatic pistol in his hand. "The silent alarm system works quite well on my ship, Mr. Nicholas. Please raise your hands."

Nick Velvet smiled. "Put away the gun, Abe. I'm about to perform the greatest trick you've ever seen. I'm about to save your life."

The curtains parted to a recorded drum roll exactly at eight o'clock. Working the lighting panel, Dominick Powell spoke the announcement into his microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen, the *Cajan Queen* is proud to present—Nicholas the Great!"

Nick stepped forward and doffed his top hat, pulling from it endless bouquets of flowers, throwing his white gloves in the air where they became a pair of doves, tapping his cane on the stage to give birth to a momentary fountain. The audience gasped and applauded. He had them, for the moment. The girls appeared behind him, two on either side.

After a few words of greeting, Nick told the men and women in the seats before him, "Because time is the enemy, time is a liar, and time is out of joint, I will ask my lovely assistants to pass among you and collect all watches, clocks, hourglasses, and timepieces. You will be given a claim check for them and they will be returned, though perhaps not in the condition they are now."

The audience stirred uncertainly, but Nick was pleased to see that most of those in the front row parted with their timepieces. The assistants in their glittery costumes worked with charm and precision, as if they'd been doing it like that for months. When they delivered the four cloth bags to the stage and placed them in a pile at Nick's feet, he knew the trick was going to work. One of the assistants brought him a heavy sledgehammer and he proceeded to whack each of the bags several times. The crunch of smashing metal could be heard over the gasps of the audience. For the first time Nick spotted Lieutenant Weston in the second-to-last row, watching him intently. He gave the bags a final kick and resumed the rest of his act.

He ran through a few card tricks, seated on the edge of the stage, then tried the linking rings. When one of them got away from him and clattered onto the stage he had a joke for the occasion. The audience loved it. Finally, when he'd exhausted all his tricks and patter, he glanced into the wings. Gloria gave him a thumbs-up sign. Two of the spangled girls rolled out a large pie. With a recorded fanfare Nick produced a sword and cut across the top of it. They pulled out a bag identical with the ones still on stage and Nick opened it, feigning surprise as he removed a wristwatch with a tag stuck to it.

"Number thirty-two!" he called out. A man came up to claim the watch, which was indeed his. The audience broke into cheers and the rest of the watches were quickly returned to their owners.

Nick bowed and left the stage, then returned with his four assistants for a final curtain call. He received a hug from Gloria as he hurried backstage. "It was perfect, Nicky! You've got a new career."

"I'm afraid I wouldn't last long among real magicians. Come on, let's mingle with the customers and try to change any slow watches we discover."

He heard a woman leaving the auditorium say to her husband, "My watch is a half-hour slower than yours." Gloria immediately moved in and insisted it was nine o'clock, right on the dot. The woman asked someone else and received the same answer. She shrugged and reset it. "I've never known it to lose time like that before."

Nick moved among the players in the casino, watching the black-jack tables and the roulette wheels, looking for something, somewhere. About an hour later, Charlie Weston joined him. "How'd you do that trick with the watches? I had my eyes on those bags every minute. They never left the stage."

"It's a trade secret," Nick answered with a smile.

"The clock out by the reception area is a half-hour fast."

"Twenty-nine minutes fast, to be exact."

"How'd you manage it, Nick?"

"For what you're paying, you get results. Explanations cost extra."

"I thought your show was an audition for Abe Roster, but he didn't come in to watch it."

"We had a talk earlier."

That seemed to surprise the detective. "You did? What about?"

"Stick around till midnight and I'll tell you."

Weston glanced at his watch. "It's not even ten yet."

"You're slow, Lieutenant. It's ten twenty-four to be exact. You'd better reset your watch."

"Yeah. Sure." But he did it.

"What about the rest of my money?"

"Meet me on the dock at midnight, when the place closes. You'll have it then. I'll be in a red Olds at this end of the parking lot."

Nick spent the next ninety minutes searching through the ship, but it was a useless task. There were too many places to hide something, and too many security guards likely to pounce on him if they found him outside the public areas. He would have to confront Charlie Weston, even if it meant losing the balance of his money.

He made sure Gloria and the girls were off the *Cajan Queen* by eleven forty-five. "Pay them off," he told Gloria, "but make sure they don't go back on board. You either. Go over to the rental car and wait for me there. If for some reason I don't join you by twelve-fifteen, drive back to the hotel and I'll meet you there later."

"Nicky, what is all this? What's going to happen to the ship?"

"Later," he told her.

Nick strolled along the front row of cars until he spotted the red Olds. Lieutenant Weston was already inside behind the wheel and he motioned for Nick to get in next to him. It was just before midnight by Nick's new improved time, and people were starting to leave the ship. He didn't worry about what they'd think when the clocks in their cars revealed a discrepancy of twenty-nine minutes.

"All right," Weston said when Nick was in the car. "Here's the rest of your money." People were streaming down the gangplank now.

"I need some information from you," Nick said, starting to reach for the envelope.

"What information?"

"Where is the bomb hidden?"

Charlie Weston snorted, then squinted at Nick through half-closed eyes, the lights from the riverboat playing across his face. "What bomb? What're you talking about?"

"Do I have to explain it, Charlie? You had money to spend on luring me down here, money to pay me to steal those twenty-nine minutes. That's more money than any police lieutenant earns, if he's honest. I've heard how Billy Burdeck controls gambling along the Gulf Coast. You don't get that big unless you pay people off, including cops. You're on Burdeck's payroll, aren't you? But tonight he's trying something that even you couldn't stomach. You couldn't go to your superiors without admitting your own involvement so you got the idea of luring me to New Orleans and hiring me."

Weston scratched his nose. "Keep talking," he said grimly.

"You hired me to steal twenty-nine minutes from the customers and employees of the *Cajan Queen*. I had to ask myself why. What would it accomplish? Well, I was told that the management allows fifteen minutes after closing to empty the ship of passengers, and another ten minutes for the employees to depart after delivering the money to the cashiers. Naturally I was thinking about a robbery, but why would that upset you so much and get you to put up your own money to safeguard these people? Certainly a robbery, even a violent one, wouldn't be likely to harm more than a handful of people. Yet by emptying the ship twenty-nine minutes early you seemed to be worried about almost everyone on board. That's when it dawned on me. It wasn't going to be a midnight robbery but a midnight bomb—something strong enough to destroy the *Cajan*

Queen and most of the people on it. I asked myself if that made sense. Was there any reason why Billy Burdeck would want the bomb to go off at midnight rather than four in the morning or two in the afternoon? Yes, a very good reason. Abe Roster was always on board at midnight to total up the night's receipts."

For a moment Weston said nothing. He seemed to be watching two couples who'd left the *Cajan Queen* together and were chatting on the dock by a moored powerboat. One couple apparently had come by water and now they were parting. "You're a smart guy, Velvet. You always were. Maybe we should have switched jobs back about twenty years ago. You'd probably have made a better cop than I did." He paused and asked, "Is Abe still on board?"

"No," Nick told him. "I needed to have him change the ship's clocks and have the employees change their watches. I told him it was my best trick—I was going to save his life."

The detective glanced at the car's clock. "It's almost a quarter to twelve, real time."

"Where's the bomb hidden, Charlie? Abe Roster's safe. What good will it do you or Burdeck to kill the innocent people still on board?"

"Tell me how you did the trick with the watches," Weston countered.

Nick sighed. "My assistants left the real bags behind the last row of seats and picked up duplicate bags full of junk to bring on stage. While everyone was watching me go to work with the sledgehammer Gloria sneaked out behind the audience and picked up the real bags. She and the girls changed the times backstage. Now where's the bomb?"

"There isn't any bomb on the ship."

"Then why were you so anxious to get the people off early?"

"Burdeck is launching a radio-controlled motorboat from across the lake. It's filled with explosives. It'll hit the *Cajan Queen* at midnight or just before."

Nick heard the words even as his eyes caught sight of a familiar figure running back up the gangplank. It was Clair, one of his four assistants, and Gloria was running about twenty feet behind her.

Nick was out of the car in an instant, shouting to Gloria as she ran up the gangplank after the girl. "Gloria! Come back! It's ten to twelve!"

Weston was out of the car too. "She's a fool to go back on board."

Nick turned and grabbed him by the shirt. "You've got to stop Burdeck's boat!"

"Can't be done. I think it's already started. He must have seen that everyone was leaving early."

"What do you mean?"

"Out there," the detective pointed. "See the running lights? That's the direction it would be coming from."

Nick couldn't see it for a moment. Then he spotted it, moving moderately fast and definitely headed toward them. He glanced quickly around, his options fading. He took a deep breath and plunged forward toward the couple just getting into their little boat. "Police!" he shouted. "I'm commandeering your boat!" He shoved the man back into the woman's arms, grabbing the key already in his hand. Then he was into the powerboat, casting off the line as the man shouted after him.

He gunned the engine and shot straight forward, swerving just in time to avoid his own collision with the riverboat. He felt comfortable on the water, remembering his sailing days on Long Island Sound, and headed straight out onto the lake. For a moment he couldn't see the running lights on the other craft, but then he picked them up, a hundred yards away and closing fast. He turned on his boat's spotlight and targeted the other craft. There was no one visible aboard it.

Nick took a deep breath and turned the wheel slightly, setting a course to intercept it. The explosion, when it came, lit up the shoreline like a sudden midnight sun.

When Gloria unlocked the door of their hotel room Nick was just stepping out of the shower. "My God, Nicky, I thought you were—!"

"Dead?" he asked with a grin. "Only a bit messy from swimming around in that scummy water. I feel better now. I swam in a bit up the shoreline and didn't want to bother explaining it all to the police. I found a cab to bring me back. Sorry to give you a fright."

She hugged him, close to tears. "Lieutenant Weston thought you were dead for sure. When I left he was telling them all about it, about Billy Burdeck wanting to blow up the *Cajan Queen* and kill Abe Roster."

"When I saw you run back after Clair I knew I had to save that boat somehow. What happened? What went wrong?"

Gloria shook her head. "You wouldn't believe it! I told the girls we'd gotten everyone off early because something would happen on board at midnight. As soon as she heard that, Clair went wild. It seems they'd started having an affair when she appeared in that

other show on the ship recently. She was in love with Roster and was trying to save him."

Nick finished drying his hair with the bath towel. "Did Weston tell the police about my stealing twenty-nine minutes from the customers?"

"I doubt it," Gloria told him. "Who would ever believe that?"

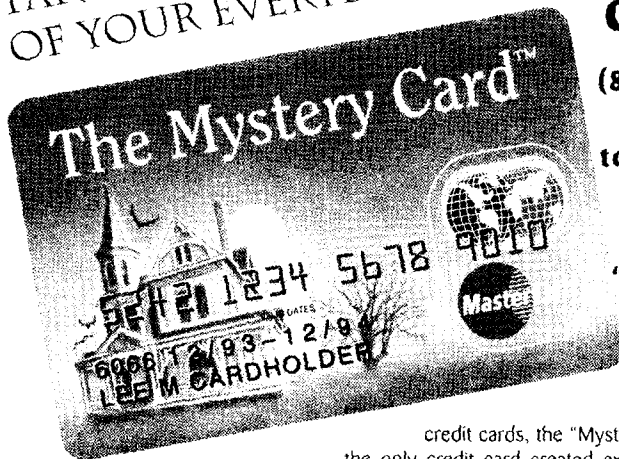


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THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

The husband-and-wife detecting team has a long and mostly jolly history. A pioneering example were Agatha Christie's Tuppence and Tommy Beresford, who first appeared unmarried in *The Secret Adversary* (1922), acquired a detective agency in the semi-parodic 1929 collection *Partners in Crime*, and made several widely spaced return engagements in Christie thrillers, ending with *Postern of Fate* (1973). Nick and Nora Charles of Dashiell Hammett's *The Thin Man* (1934) appeared with their dog Asta in no additional novels but became series characters in a half-dozen films starring William Powell and Myrna Loy. In the forties, Frances and Richard Lockridge's Mr. and Mrs. North followed in the insouciant, heavy-drinking pattern of Nick and Nora, as did Jake and Helene Justus, secondary characters to John J. Malone in Craig Rice's novels.

Though Nick narrated *The Thin Man* and the cases of the Beresfords, Norths, and Justuses were told in the third person, the husband-and-wife mysteries have most commonly been narrated by the wife. This was true of several of the other married detecting teams of the forties, including Frances Crane's Pat and Jean Abbott, Theodora DuBois's Jeffrey and Anne

McNeill, and my personal favorites, Kelley Roos's Jeff and Haila Troy. The Troys, along with Patrick Quentin's Peter and Iris Duluth, were one of the few detecting couples to have serious marital problems, actually separating at one point. One of the contemporary mystery's favorite marriages has also had its ups and downs.

*** Nancy Pickard: *Confession*, Pocket Books, \$20. Pickard's novels are not usually considered husband-and-wife mysteries, since narrator Jenny Cain, Massachusetts foundation director and detecting amateur, is consistently identified as series star and cop husband Geof Bushfield is offstage in many of her adventures. But in this case, involving a teenage boy who appears on their doorstep claiming to be Geof's biological son and seeking a true solution to the alleged murder-suicide of his mother and legal father, they are clearly in co-sleuthing harness. Though the plot and a heavily portentous opening chapter lead the reader to expect tough emotional going, the book proves to be in a lighter vein than some of Pickard's recent, particularly the Edgar-nominated *I.O.U.*, at least until the dramatic final chapter. I'm not sure the conclusion really works, but a Pickard novel is never less than readable and involving.

*** Gar Anthony Haywood: *Going Nowhere Fast*, Putnam, \$19.95. Dottie and Joe Loudermilk, an African-American couple in their fifties, are a likable variation on the traditional married sleuthing team. Touring the country in happy retirement while evading their worrisome children, they become embroiled in a crime problem at the Grand Canyon when their shiftless son Bad Dog turns up just in time to find a sitting dead man in the bathroom of their Airstream trailer. Husband Joe is the ex-cop, but narrator Dottie does most of the detecting, assisted by Bad Dog. Haywood observes what should be the first rule of a comic mystery: he keeps it short. The plot is slight, but the telling is charming—to my admittedly masculine ear, Haywood does the feminine viewpoint flawlessly—and I look forward to repeat visits by the Loudermilk family.

*** Aaron Elkins: *Dead Men's Hearts*, Mysterious, \$18.95. Like the Jenny Cains, the cases of Skeleton Detective Gideon Oliver are not usually considered husband-and-wife mysteries, but spouse Julie is always on the scene to help demonstrate one of mystery fiction's happiest marriages. This time the couple travel to Egypt for the filming of a documentary on an institute called Horizon House and wind up looking into the murder of its overbearing director. As usual in this series, a strong sense of background combines with solid classical puzzlespinning. Then there's the fun of toting up the

food references.

*** R.D. Zimmerman: *Red Trance*, Morrow, \$20. Maddy and Alex Phillips, appearing for the third time, are another and rarer variety of male/female sleuthing team. She is a blind and paraplegic forensic hypnotist who lives in wealthy seclusion on Lake Michigan, while he is her brother, legman, and Watson. Most of the novel is in flashback as Alex, in a hypnotic trance that heightens his memory and observation, recounts to Maddy his dangerous adventures in St. Petersburg, where an old friend has been murdered. The picture of post-Soviet Russia, a locale the author knows well, is vivid and fascinating. The unusual structural technique, combined with an emotionally charged, not-quite-over-the-top first-person narrative style, places Zimmerman among the most individual voices in the genre.

*** Nick Gaitano: *Special Victims*, Simon and Schuster, \$21. Some of the best ironic titles (e.g. *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*) allude to war. This one, referring to a Chicago police section that, says one character, "they created for dead people who got money," takes its resonance from the war on crime—and the probing reader can undoubtedly find multiple meanings for it. Lieutenant Tony Tulio, head of the unit, goes after a unique serial killer known as the Collector, who harvests body parts for the ailing relatives of his clients. Though the set-up seems conventional, the

way it plays out is anything but, finishing with as thorough a blood-bath as any Shakespearean tragedy. Gaitano is a pseudonym of the Edgar-nominated Eugene Izzi.

*** Paul Bishop: *Kill Me Again*, Avon, \$4.99. The latest from one of the Los Angeles Police Department's best-known officer-novelists has at its center a fascinating legal issue: can a man who years before was tried and convicted for killing his wife, although her body was never found, be charged with killing her again when she turns up as a fresh corpse shortly after he has been released on parole? Legal buffs may be disappointed that the matter isn't resolved in court, but satisfying plot twists, exciting action sequences, and insider details of police work make up for the lapse. Homicide detective Fey Croaker is a strong central figure, though she shares her last initial with too many other characters: Colby, Cordell, Craven, and Cahill.

In a field as crowded and competitive as the contemporary mystery, how does the overwhelmed reader

navigate from one worthwhile author to another with similar qualities? One way is through a book like *By a Woman's Hand: A Guide to Mystery Fiction by Women* (Berkley, \$10), expertly written by Jean Swanson and Dean James and covering about 250 contemporary female writers. The alleged male ascendancy in secondary coverage, which has been overstated to put it mildly, is used to justify such a helpful encyclopedic reference source as this being confined to writers of one sex.

Rarely does one renowned American mystery novelist write the life of another. The late Dorothy B. Hughes's 1978 book on Erle Stanley Gardner was one example of the phenomenon. Charlotte MacLeod gives us another in *Had She But Known: A Biography of Mary Roberts Rinehart* (Mysterious, \$21.95). MacLeod emphasizes the early life of her subject, a gifted and important writer of popular fiction who has sometimes been unfairly patronized by the mystery genre's historians.

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a **NEW** short story by

SUZANNE JONES

After earning a Ph.D. in literature and discovering that her education provided no marketable skills, Suzanne Jones decided to go into the insurance business. In 1986 a company transfer from Colorado to Los Angeles gave her a chance to experience the southern California lifestyle she depicts in this new psychological thriller, in which an insurance executive confesses to the most heinous crimes . . .

COME NIGHT, COME SILENCE

by **SUZANNE JONES**

Edward Brennan stands in his bare feet in the shadowy kitchen. In the night-light from the stove, the cutlery on the magnetic strip above the counter doesn't glimmer. The immaculately clean tile beneath the palms of his hands doesn't shine. He has just uncorked a bottle of Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon (Reserve).

He is a man of just under average height whose broad shoulders seem to stretch the fabric of his snowy shirt although it has been expressly tailored for him by a shirtmaker in Beverly Hills. His monograms on the heavy cuffs are closely worked in a burgundy thread. In the dim light they look like spots of blood.

He runs one of his hands over his smooth head. Every morning in the shower he shaves the stubble from his scalp. The hair surrounding the tonsure is red-gold and is as vigorous as his closely cropped beard. His lips in the nest of curly hair are as soft and full as a girl's.

The house creaks in the wind from the desert, although it is a new house. It was built on the dry brown hills west of Thousand Oaks by a homesick Englishman after one of the Tudor manor

© 1994 by Suzanne Jones.

houses he had admired as a child. The door immediately to Edward's left leads to the back stairs—the scullery stairs, his wife calls them—and the next two floors. From his wife's bedroom on the third floor, when the wind from the desert drives the smog out to sea, one can see a glittering expanse of blue water, the curve of the beach at Malibu, and far, far away, fading like a dream, buildings of white stone and black glass.

Edward has to open several drawers before he finds a clean white cloth. He moves quietly. The servants are asleep. Everyone is asleep.

Marianne lay on her side in the bed flipping irritably through the latest catalog from Spivey. She had pulled the satin sheet carelessly up only to her waist, and beneath it she was naked. From time to time she glanced irritably at the back of Roger's head as he finished dressing in front of the full-length mirror. She knew he was admiring the angle of his jaw, the cleanness of the line. Roger was very proud of his jawline, and rightly so. He pretended to adjust his tie.

"I don't think you understand how humiliating this is for me," she said. She stared at the back of his head, and he sighed.

"Of course I do, darling. It's not every day of the week that Friar Tuck—"

"Don't call him that," she said.

"—confesses to murder."

He left the mirror a little unwillingly and came to sit on the edge of the bed.

She sank back on the oversized pillows and glared at the squares set in the plaster ceiling some ten feet above her. The afternoon sun poured across the peach carpet from a mauve sky and touched the expensive highlights in her chestnut hair. Beyond the diamond-paned window, shrouded by the dense air, the sea swept ashore at Malibu.

"But darling," he said, "what can you expect from a Jesuit who married a nun? The man is fundamentally weird."

Roger was a little pleased at that. He wondered if she got the association: fundamentalism, religion. Probably. Marianne was very bright.

He patted her firm, flat tummy. She did eleven hundred crunches a day to keep it that way.

"This is beyond weird, Roger."

The chill in her voice stopped his hand where it was.

"It's definitely grounds for divorce, my dear. You could take him for all he's worth."

Marianne closed her eyes. "Roger," she said with the weariness of repetition, "Eddie doesn't *have* money, he *makes* money. Do you know what the payments are on a nine hundred and fifty thousand dollar mortgage? Well, neither do I, but that's not the point. I couldn't make a single month's. Neither could you. But Eddie's just a little money-making machine. He turns those guileless blue eyes on a client and suddenly checks are flying through the air. I know talent when I see it, and I knew it the moment I met him. It's one of the three things he does really well. Eat, screw, and sell insurance to the stars. But he doesn't *have* anything."

Roger thought that the way Marianne spent Eddie's money he never would have any, but had the common sense not to say so even if he was a little hurt by her tone. Roger might not be the brightest stockbroker in Thousand Oaks, but he was sensitive. He had to scramble just to keep up the payments on his Mercedes, and it was three years old. That was the beauty of the car. No one could really tell how old it was. He was thinking of painting it another color next year and passing it off as a new one.

Roger was handsome, well dressed, and—thanks to the time differential between coasts—had his afternoons free.

"So what if I'm extravagant," she said to the ceiling. "Somebody's got to spend Eddie's money. It might as well be me. Who better? I've got more taste in my little finger than most people have in their whole bodies. That's my talent."

"Among others." Roger grinned.

"Anyway, why would I want a divorce? I like Eddie. But, my God, how would you like to get a call in the middle of the night that your husband's been arrested? Arrested because he has confessed to being the hillside slasher? In Van Nuys, for God's sake!"

Roger decided flippancy was not to his advantage. Marianne did have the loveliest skin.

He frowned. "Why Van Nuys?"

"That's where they found the last body," she said impatiently. "So that's where Eddie confessed."

Roger wished he had the time to read a paper now and then, but he could hardly keep up with everything he was supposed to read as it was. If it didn't make the *Wall Street Journal*, he was unlikely to have heard of it. But everyone had heard of the slasher.

And Van Nuys was the pits. Roger knew it well. He had lived there for a time some years ago, before it became too dangerous to do so. Suddenly Eddie's little escapade was taking on the déclassé griminess of the tabloid. Roger knew Marianne wouldn't be caught dead in Van Nuys.

"I understand," he said sympathetically. Sympathy was one of Roger's strong suits. "So what did Friar—Eddie say?"

"Oh, he wouldn't talk about it." Marianne frowned, then immediately touched the skin between her eyes, smoothing away the wrinkle there. Her husband was making her look older than her thirty-four years. "He was sheepish, embarrassed. All he would say was that he was having trouble sleeping."

"Sounds like guilt to me, darling."

Roger could no longer afford therapy, but remnants of those sessions flitted through his mind like snatches of songs half remembered.

"Oh, stuff and nonsense. We've been married four years. If he were going to act weird because he feels guilty, you'd think he'd have done it sooner."

Roger hated it when she was short with him. Roger said stiffly, "What about the nun and the kid?"

"—ex-nun, Roger, and ex-wife."

She glared at him, and he regretted bringing it up. He knew it made her edgy. He opened his mouth but could think of nothing comforting to say.

"Never mind," she said. "Anyway, I don't give a goddamn why he did it. I'm the one who has to deal with it. Brenda Delaney already has their invitation to the Jonathans' ball. We haven't."

Marianne frowned again.

Roger wanted to say something supportive. The Jonathans' was a social event that was very important to Marianne. But he doubted the machinery of the club could have found out about Edward's gaffe soon enough to have stricken the Brennans from the guest list. He had confessed but two days ago.

"It's probably just the mail," he tried, but she did not change expression.

"Why'd they let him go, anyway?" Roger asked. "When he said he did it and all? He fits the profile to a T: professional, white, middle-aged male. What more do they want?"

"Details," she said absently. "They questioned him for hours, but the police don't let the papers print everything they know. Eddie

couldn't tell them enough to satisfy them that he was the one."

Roger was a little disappointed at Eddie's throwing himself into the maw of justice being so lightly regarded. Then he felt like saying something mean about Eddie.

"You're not the only one who spends money like it's going to be devalued, darling. The man dresses like a peacock." He was only partially successful at keeping the envy out of his voice.

Marianne had once taken Roger into Edward's bedroom to show him the texture of a jacket which she thought would be perfect for him. She hadn't offered to let him try it on for good reason. Roger was a foot taller than Edward and sadly narrower in the shoulders. But Roger had been impressed with the number and opulence of the clothes hanging there, given the almost monastic simplicity of the rest of the room.

Marianne closed her eyes. It was times like these that she regretted giving up smoking. "I dress Eddie. When I first met him he was wearing double-knit suits and button-down collars."

Roger was shocked into silence but wasn't sure whether he believed her or not. He didn't think anyone had manufactured double-knit suits since the sixties.

"You do have exquisite taste," he acknowledged. He stroked his maroon and blue banded silk tie and tried to remember if she had given it to him.

Marianne moved his hand off her stomach.

"He hasn't been sleeping lately."

"How would you know, darling? That's a solid-core door." Roger gestured toward Edward's bedroom.

"I find him all over the house in the mornings, that's why, looking like hell. Found him in the billiard room, once in the study, you name it. Once on the patio, for God's sake."

Roger thought that peculiar but was a little miffed at her removing his hand. He stood up.

"I've got to go. Dinner with Mum."

Marianne nodded, her soft, curly hair bobbing prettily. She stretched out her arms.

"Give us a kiss. I'm sorry, darling, but he's just been so weird lately, it's making me cranky. See you soon."

Edward folds the soft white cloth lengthwise until he makes of it a narrow band. He places it around his neck, smoothing the ends so they lie flat against his broad chest. He pours the wine into the

crystal goblet, recorks the bottle, and sets it aside. He puts both hands around the body of the glass and slowly raises it above his head. His hands and the wine disappear in the dark.

Roger watched Marianne pace the room. She was smoking. He pulled the sheet closer about his chest. He was a little sensitive about his lack of chest hair.

"Canoga Park?" he asked, as much as anything to stop her angry rush from one end of the room to the other. It was making him dizzy.

"Canoga Park," she said. "But this time they let him go after only a few hours."

"If they don't catch the slasher soon, Eddie's going to see the inside of every police station in the greater Los Angeles area."

"Tell me about it."

Marianne stared out the diamond-paned window at the shadows which were creeping across the brown hills, and beyond to the purple haze. She supposed the ocean was out there somewhere.

Roger hated being ignored.

"What did the psychiatrist say?" he tried.

"Which? The police psychiatrist or my psychiatrist?"

"Either. Both."

She sighed. "Same old, same old. The police say people confess to get attention—"

"Eddie's in toastmasters, for God's sake—"

"—or have the need to be punished."

Roger nodded sagely. It was as he thought. "Guilt," he said.

Marianne chewed the cuticle of an acrylic nail. "So they seem to think."

She resumed her pacing.

"But you don't think so," Roger said.

"No."

"Wife and only son dying a fiery death—"

"—*ex-wife*—"

"—has to give them pause," Roger said reasonably, "even if Eddie had nothing to do with it. He didn't cause the accident. Fourteen people died when the tanker truck got rear-ended in that sand-storm."

"Fifteen," Marianne said.

"Husband runs off with secretary—"

"—administrative aide—"

“—and the nun and kid buy the farm.” Roger felt that if she was going to start smoking again, he got to call a spade a spade.

“*Ex-nun.*”

“Just bad luck, but you can see how it might get Eddie down.”

“That’s what they both glommed onto.”

“But you don’t agree.”

“No.”

While Roger admired her confidence in flying in the face of expert opinion, he thought her unreasonable. Her dedication to her own opinion was starting to irritate him. He got out of bed and started to dress.

“Just because it happened over three years ago,” he said, “doesn’t mean it couldn’t have been eating away at him and just now bubble to the surface.”

Marianne watched him put on his socks. She wondered if he knew what an idiot he looked like in putting on his socks before he put on the rest of his clothes.

“That’s what they think,” she said. “God, Roger, if you can’t make it as a broker, maybe you can make it as a shrink.”

“There’s no need to get nasty, darling.”

Marianne ground out her cigarette and sat on the edge of the bed.

“I’m sorry, but he’s driving me wild. Both of them said, ‘Not to worry, he’s harmless.’ Harmless? Harmless? Would you buy insurance from a certifiably crazy person?”

“Of course not.” Actually Roger had let his policy lapse. He couldn’t afford the premium, and he was pretty sure that should anything happen to him, his mother had enough money to get by.

“Well, neither will anyone else,” Marianne said.

Roger came to sit by her and patted her knee.

“At least you got your invitation to the Jonathans’.”

“They can hardly take it back, can they?”

Marianne stared bleakly into a future as a social leper with horrendous mortgage payments.

“Did Eddie tell them anyway? The psychiatrists, I mean.”

“What psychiatrists? He hasn’t seen any psychiatrists on his own. I’ve tried to get him to see Fred, but I think Eddie thinks Freud was in league with the devil. The police psychiatrist only said that Eddie wanted to sleep, but he can’t because of the screaming.”

Roger felt cold. He drew the edge of the bedspread over his lap.

“That’s why they believed him at first,” Marianne continued. “They thought he meant the screams of those poor women that

maniac carves up in the afternoons. Which is ridiculous. You can't sell as much insurance as Eddie does and take the afternoons off to butcher people."

"But now they think he means the ex-wife and kid?"

"That's what they think."

There was an awkward silence. Roger wished his clothes weren't on the other side of the bed.

"What makes you so sure they're wrong?" he asked.

"They're wrong because at the funeral Eddie said I was paid for."

"What?" Roger was shocked. "What on earth did he mean by that?"

"I think he meant that he was being punished for being with me. That their deaths were the price he had to pay for our happiness."

"That's a bit thick, isn't it?"

Roger stood up and began to look for his underwear.

"He said his suffering made a balance. For Eddie everything has to balance."

"Did you tell them that?"

"Of course not. What good would it do? I did tell them that he slept like a baby for three years after the accident. Anyway, I don't care why he is now running all over Los Angeles confessing to crimes he can't have committed. I just want him to stop. Did I tell you about the clippings?"

"What clippings?" Roger could find only one of his shoes.

"I went through his things this morning while he was at the office, or looking for another jurisdiction, or whatever he does now with his days besides not sell insurance. In his sock drawer I found a pile of newspaper clippings about the slasher."

"That's morbid."

"No, I think it's homework. He had underlined some of the grisly details. I think he's trying to get better at convincing them."

"Hell of a hobby." Then Roger had a chilling thought and paused in the act of retrieving his shoe from beneath the bed.

"You don't think he knows about us?"

"Of course he doesn't."

For once Roger was grateful for her absolute conviction. But like picking at a scab, he couldn't leave it alone.

"That's good, darling, but what makes you so certain?"

"We're still alive, aren't we?"

Roger decided she was being flippant. But with Marianne, he never knew. It was part of her charm.

"I like that part about his being harmless," he said. "I think I'll go with that."

Roger finished tying his tie. He ran a finger along the edge of his jaw. Was it his imagination or was the skin there losing some of its elasticity? He frowned at his image. Sometimes it was easier than at others to see the skull beneath the skin. Those girls.

"Why do *you* think he keeps doing it?" Roger asked.

"I don't know and I don't care. He tells me he's very sorry. Very sorry, but the screaming has got to stop. He can't sleep."

"He might try a bed instead of patio furniture. I'm afraid he's nutty as a fruitcake, my dear."

"That's not very constructive, Roger."

Roger looked at his eyes. Sometimes they didn't look as disappointed as they now did. Sometimes they showed his power, his magnetism. He needed a confidence builder. Maybe he'd go for a drive near Pepperdine. There were plenty of girls there.

Edward blots his mouth carefully on the white cloth. In the dim light the wine stain looks black. The back of his shirt is wet. He doesn't feel the moisture rolling down his sides. His lips move.

"Forgive me."

He tried to make them punish him for what he is about to do. He tried.

He takes a knife from the wall and starts up the stairs.



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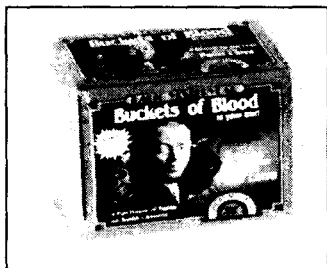
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A resident of Eilat, Israel, Alex Auswaks published his first novel, A Trick of Diamonds, in the U.K. with HarperCollins. He has since had stories in several anthologies including that put out by the International Association of Crime Writers. His debut for EQMM is truly international in scope, featuring a would-be sleuth who sets out from Britain for a holiday in Germany, only to take a step back in time to old Tientsin . . .

MURDER MYSTERY

by ALEX AUSWAKS

The old folk are beginning to depart this world. Before they go, they visit each other. They fly from one part of the world to another. Their children and grandchildren slip boxes of chocolate to airline stewardesses and say, "He's eighty," "She's ninety." The airline stewardesses smile and promise to look after them.

After a short stay, a stay too short considering the length of the journey, they part in the knowledge that this is the last time they will ever see each other. They put a cheerful face on it, not to depress the other one, of course. It's the way you leave life that matters. After all, none of us could help the way we came in. In the meantime, they urge each other, remember to keep in touch.

One day my mother received a letter from her old friend Frau Josefa Hsueh. Under the attempt at euphemism, in her stilted Germanic English, old Frau Hsueh was "preparing to go." Before she went, she would love to see someone, anyone, to remind her of some of the old days.

My mother, in her turn, wrote to me, beginning her letter with the ritual formula the circumstances required, "Old Frau Josefa Hsueh is about to prescribe you long life . . ." Having got the ritual part over, Mother asked me to visit the old lady. I was always gadding about on the Continent and heaven knows where else, she wrote. Instead of wasting my time and money on such idle pursuits,

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why not visit old Frau Hsueh. Such an act would be written down for me in the world to come (while my mother is neither modern nor trendy, her theology is remarkable).

I wrote back and said my holidays weren't for some time, as she well knew.

Mother wrote back and said she had already taken the precaution of sending the dates of my vacation to Frau Hsueh, when she was "most likely" to expect me. Would I please, please remember, continued Mother, how we had done things in the old days. Get a really nice basket, not one of those plastic carriers with the name of a supermarket chain printed in ugly letters over it, and fill it with goodies. Cover the basket with a nice cloth, perhaps something in Irish linen. Frau Hsueh is very poor, Mother concluded, please don't skimp on the size of the basket. Go to a good continental delicatessen in your own area and explain what it is for. If the proprietor comes from the Continent, Mother wrote pointedly, everything will be fresh and of the best quality for such a purpose, never mind what they sell to everyone else.

In my sarcastic reply I wrote that I had no doubt there was a delicatessen not far from Frau Hsueh where I could buy the nicest things. My German wasn't all that good, but it would stretch to shopping for food. Germany is a rich country these days, I pointed out, and I was sure the goodies there equalled those in my corner shop, run by a lovely Indian family with preconceptions about our diet that antedated the Raj.

My mother's reply was both anguished and angry.

It seems, she wrote to me, that I had forgotten the good old ways after all. To bring food to Frau Hsueh from her own corner shop was mere charity. To prepare the gifts before one left on one's journey, to wrap each item individually, to pack them in a beautiful container, was to demonstrate care and forethought towards an old friend. And, for heaven's sake, no duty-free label on the cognac. Finally, don't forget Frau Hsueh's initials on the tablecloth, napkins, and towels, which she hoped weren't to be purchased at a sale.

I set off sure that I looked like Little Red Riding Hood. Security men at airports gave me that extra frisk. Airline stewardesses raised their elegantly pencilled eyebrows to indicate what they thought of my hand luggage. A youthful German customs officer tried to chalk a mark on the basket, gave up, laughed, and said, "You are come from dem old days, *nein*?"

In the event, like Little Red Riding Hood, I arrived too late. The coffin was already in a side room of the cemetery chapel. In accordance with the ecumenical spirit of our times, or mere functionalism, it served for Catholics and Protestants alike.

A youthful Herr Pastor, who looked as if he had been a village baker and joined the church when a conglomerate had taken over supplying bread, shook my hand in a friendly manner. I was taken aback. In Tientsin, Lutheran ministers and missionaries, believing in the word becoming flesh, were an aloof lot, concentrating on the power of their words. The later commissars of the Eighth Route Army had been like that. But Herr Pastor Weber was as friendly as the English missionaries I had once known; he held me by the hand and elbow and told me that the news of my impending arrival had given great comfort to the old lady. Fortunately, Herr Adolf (here he lowered his voice and said he was afraid that name had been rather common then) Fleischmann had arrived before she died. That, too, he said, had been a great consolation to her. Herr Pastor insisted that I should call him David, as he knew that in English-speaking countries everyone used first names. So much friendlier than the old German ways. Next I was introduced to Adolf, who didn't seem to enjoy being addressed so familiarly. He wore the sort of look that said, "Don't drop dead in front of me. I've got other things to do than call the undertaker." However, he recognised my surname and condescended to state he had seen it in Tientsin.

In the equally ecumenical chapel Herr Pastor in his address said that whilst there was no family, two very old friends had journeyed a long way to be present. This led to us being treated as chief mourners. Herr Pastor led us to the grave, Fleischmann and I in front of those in attendance, mostly very old people.

Fleischmann stood naturally impassive as Herr Pastor performed the graveside ceremony. Two shovels stuck out of the earth, one on each side of the open grave. He and I motioned to each other to throw the first clod of earth, and when he said, "You are a guest in our country," I went first.

The rest shovelled a clod of earth and shook hands with Fleischmann and me, offering their condolences, as if we were closely related to the departed. Fleischmann tried to look as if it was no concern of his, but after the third or fourth handshake his mouth set in a firm line.

All those who had shaken hands with us walked away. Herr Pastor motioned Fleischmann and myself to stay, "It is our custom for

the family to stay behind. Perhaps you will act as her family and utter your farewells." Fleischmann shook his head, indicating he had nothing to say, and gestured at me, as if to signal that I was more likely to say something. I cursed him mentally, and stretched my German to its uttermost limits with the trite hope that the earth would be as soft as a pillow under her head.

Herr Pastor invited us back for coffee. I was still clutching my luggage, including the basket, and when we got to his house, offered to open it up. We had the usual argy-bargy as they refused and I insisted, opening the cognac and pâté.

"I knew Frau Hsueh had a great tragedy in her life," said Herr Pastor, "but she never spoke of it. Perhaps one of you . . ."

Fleischmann had already tossed off his cognac. I poured him another one. For the first time I was aware of a prolonged nervous tic. He raised his head, inclined it to one shoulder, and then moved it to the other shoulder in a long arc. An uncle of mine who had been beaten by Japanese soldiers occasionally did this when under stress. "This gentleman," said Fleischmann, breathing in deeply as if to stop himself from stammering, "has travelled farther than I have. Perhaps he knows more. I should like the pâté."

Since my childhood, in fact, virtually since I began to learn English, I have always been a great fan of the crime novel. With all due respect to the authors of the *Haliburton Readers*, it is Edgar Wallace and Leslie Charteris I have always considered my English teachers. It was probably the reason why I had always wanted to see England. I visualised every country lane concealing a body, every cathedral city at least one murderer. As for London, it must be full of murderers, though I was to discover, to my chagrin, the word did not exist.

Alas, there weren't any murders in Tientsin. We had war and revolution, we lived through civil wars, but a real murder, in the English style, there was not for a long time.

As usual, when it happened, it was too close to home.

The Hsuehs had been our neighbours when we lived in the former German concession. The German concession had reverted to the Chinese authorities as long ago as the end of the First World War, but everyone still referred to it as the German concession.

Josefa Hoffman, as she had been on arrival, came from Germany to join the German Lutheran Mission and married a Chinese convert, Mr. Hsueh. They had one daughter, Marianne.

Like so many mixed-race girls, Marianne took your breath away. She inherited an olive skin, high cheekbones, long straight jet-black hair from her father. From her mother, she inherited a curvaceous figure. She could dress in both European and Chinese clothes and be taken as easily for one as for the other. Her German and her Chinese were fluent, as was her English.

At school she was a bit of a tomboy, but her mother said this was high spirits, and if she had been a boy, nobody would say anything.

She began going out with boys at fourteen or fifteen, but Frau Hsueh claimed her daughter was a serious girl and "senior" boys stimulated her schoolwork. True, she did well at school.

As soon as Marianne left school and went to work, she got in with a fast crowd. People tittle-tattled to Frau Hsueh, but she said Marianne was a loyal girl and not one to shun people just because they were in trouble occasionally.

Once Marianne was brought home after an opium party, but Frau Hsueh said she was feverish and put her to bed with an aspirin.

Everyone said Marianne would come to a bad end, and it was such a pity because she came from a good family and was such a lovely-looking girl.

Mr. Hsueh and his wife visited us often, but after she left school, Marianne stopped coming. I suppose we were very boring for someone like her. Even our cafes didn't seem to draw her. Her favourite place was Maxim's, our top nightclub, and the Jai Alai Club, which was notorious. She was always with a large crowd.

Mrs. Vogelmann first came to us with the news that Marianne Hsueh had been murdered. My mother was shaken at first, and then asked if she was sure. Mrs. Vogelmann had got hold of the wrong end of the stick often enough before. Mrs. Vogelmann said she had no doubt. Hadn't everyone said Marianne would come to a bad end? Mother ordered a trishaw. Telephones were a rarity in those days.

Mother came back in a state of considerable shock.

It wasn't Marianne who had been murdered.

Marianne was charged with murder.

The trial purported to establish that Marianne had had an affair with a married man. His wife had refused to grant him a divorce. So he and Marianne murdered his wife, rolled up her body in a carpet, and asked a friend to store it in his attic till they had made arrangements to have it removed. This was not an unusual request. Tientsin is a famous carpet-manufacturing centre (they are sold under the name Tientsin carpets all over the world). It wasn't un-

usual to buy a carpet, have it rolled up in heavy-duty paper or cloth, and ask someone to store it because one wished to surprise a wife or anyone else for a birthday or anniversary.

Unfortunately for the conspirators, there had been a hot spell. The carpet gave out an odour . . . the friend tried to get in touch with the two, as it wasn't being collected as arranged. Neither was to be found. In fact, both had gone to the seaside, proclaiming that his wife had returned home. The odour grew worse. The friend undid the carpet . . . and called the police.

The lovers were sentenced to life imprisonment.

Mr. Hsueh had a stroke that paralysed him completely. Frau Hsueh nursed him, looked after the shop, and visited Marianne. The prison was far from the foreign concessions. Mr. Hsueh died and Mrs. Hsueh gave up the shop. She was no longer the bubbly hausfrau she had been. Her voice grew shrill, her movements jerky and nervous, her eyes wild. She would frequently open her eyes wide in horror and then shut them again for a few seconds before opening them wide again. "I would like to go back to that moment when . . . when . . . and cut it out of time . . . you know what I mean." For the first time I realised that what crime writers do not tell you in their lighthearted entertainment is the havoc murder leaves behind in the lives of the innocent. Mother, incidentally, swept all crime books out of the house, nor were we permitted to discuss the case, under the severest penalties. Newspapers were banned from the house till the trial was over and sentence passed.

Mrs. Hsueh went to visit her daughter as often as she could. She would stop at our place on her way to the prison, never on the way back. She saved every penny she could to take food to her daughter as well as money to bribe the warders to ease Marianne's miserable condition.

When the Communists arrived, one of their first concerns was, obviously, social reform. They began by sweeping beggars off the streets into camps, where they were to be taught a trade. Some of the beggars escaped, for as far as they were concerned, begging was their trade. They knew how to make sores appear on their legs, how to keep an arm or leg hidden out of sight. If you grow up in the Orient, you must learn to distinguish genuine poverty from the professional variety. It took two or three tries before the beggars realised their ancient trade was over and done with. After beggars came the reform of the criminal population, starting with those serving sentences.

Frau Hsueh still brought us news of Marianne. First, that she was to be reeducated, which made her mother apprehensive. The apprehension gave way to gratitude, then delight. How wrong everybody had been about Communists, Frau Hsueh used to exclaim, clasping her hands before her in deep emotion. She was writing to the Lutheran authorities in Germany to commend Communist reeducation.

A little time passed and Frau Hsueh became very quiet, very passive again. Marianne had been a trusted prisoner. Then a member of the prison council supervising the reeducation of fellow prisoners. Finally, she came out on parole and went to live with the prison governor. There was no word of her former lover.

The day came when Frau Hsueh confided to Mother that her daughter no longer needed her. She would return to Germany. Thank heavens, despite her marriage, she had retained her German passport. The Lutheran church had offered to pay her fares and find her a place in an old people's home.

By that time we were used to poignant farewells. Nevertheless, Mother insisted on all formalities being strictly observed. We all had to dress up to show respect. I had to wear a tie. Money was tight, but Mother gave her a farewell tea. At the end of the tea, out came the inevitable bottle of cognac. We drank to Frau Hsueh's health and Mother summoned up her German to say she hoped the journey would be as smooth as a tablecloth, an old bit of Siberian idiom. For anyone from Russia, there should have been the inevitable sitting down and then the accompanying to the end of the street. Frau Hsueh was a German Protestant. Convention dictated that she should be farewelled according to the custom of her kind. Father had been sent to school briefly in Leipzig, but could not remember any peculiarly German method of saying goodbye. My mother gave him the inevitable lecture that there was no point in knowing other people's languages if one wasn't acquainted with their customs as well. When in doubt, Mother created her own. Anyone starting a new religion would do well to invite her to sit on its committee for inventing traditional rituals.

From her friend the baroness, who had suddenly become Citizeness Kursel, she acquired a German Bible. Mr. Paradissis of the Tientsin Bookshop yielded a portrait of Martin Luther, which was framed. Both were gift-wrapped in ribbon which the baroness assured Mother were Germany's national colours. These were presented to Frau Hsueh at the moment of leaving us, together with

the inevitable gift of food from Mother, in case the ship bearing her foundered on a desert island.

After Frau Hsueh left, my mother sat down and howled. This was quite a sight for us. We had always considered Mother made of cast iron. I only discovered later that she already knew I was headed for internment, and for internees there was neither reeducation nor parole.

The food and cognac was gone.

Adolf Fleischmann turned to me, "You began by saying you enjoyed crime novels."

"Yes," I said.

"They don't seem to have sharpened your wits," he said. His head was moving round and from side to side. I thought he would have a paroxysm.

"In what way?" I asked.

"There is something wrong with your story," he said. Actually what he said was, "Zer iss ssomessink wrong mit your history."

I looked at him uncomprehending.

Herr Pastor said, "I, too, like criminal romances."

Both looked at me as if I was not very intelligent. Fleischmann half rose from his chair. "Did you know the parties concerned?"

"Well, I knew Marianne," I said.

"But not even the name of the person who unwrapped the carpet and who must have been an important witness at the trial . . ."

"Like I told you, Mother forbade any newspapers in the house at the time."

"Or the lover's name?"

"Look, this was thirty-five years ago," I said.

"Let me give you another scenario. Marianne has a lover. He murders his wife for whatever reason. Or she has an accident and he knows nobody will believe him innocent."

"Yeee . . . s."

"He goes to Marianne and says, 'I did it for you.' Frau Hsueh had told you Marianne was a . . . loyal girl? You thought that's just a mother talking about her daughter. But if Marianne was loyal to her friends . . ."

"She became a Communist official when it suited her," I said hotly, watching his head go from side to side in a nervous frenzy.

"Or because she felt the need to evince loyalty. People had failed her, why not a cause!" I felt he was running ahead of himself.

"Or because she wanted to help someone," said Herr Pastor quietly. "It was very sad here, too."

"Go on," I said, ignoring the pastor's intervention.

"So she arranges for one of her other friends . . . she had a very wide circle of friends, to employ a euphemism . . . in your English language also there are many euphemisms . . . so, she arranges for a friend or lover to dispose of the body. The other lover discovers he is not the only man in her life. She has gone to Tsing Tao for the hot weather . . ."

"Where's your evidence?" I challenged him, the usual response from someone caught out with the wrong story.

"Unlike you, I knew the parties. I knew all the parties."

The movements of his head subsided. He drained at an empty glass nervously, put it down irritably, and rose, first offering a hand to the pastor. He seemed to recollect something, reached into his pocket and handed him a cheque. "This should pay for a headstone. There will be arrangements for flowers."

He turned to me. All the agitation was now gone from his voice and manner. "And now, will you shake hands with me?"

I went straight to the station and caught a train for Seligenstadt. I had with me a carrier bag full of the latest crime novels for the friends I was staying with. "This time," I said to them on arrival, "I haven't just brought you some mystery books, I've brought you a real mystery."

I related my story.

When I left, Gerdi and Reinhard were still arguing whether Fleischmann was the lover or the betrayer and cursing my rotten memory for names.



A self-educated man and a lifelong fan of Louis L'Amour, James Ritchie is primarily a writer of western fiction. His first publication in that field, a short story, appeared in 1980 and was followed by two western novels for Walker and Company. Mr. Ritchie has made his living as a hunter, trapper, construction worker, and farmer; the last of these occupations may explain how he is able to capture so well the atmosphere of the midwest farm town depicted in his new story for us . . .

WILD STRAWBERRIES

by JAMES A. RITCHIE

Linda had obviously stopped at the supermarket before coming home from work, because when she parked the car in the driveway she honked before coming inside. She only does that when she needs help carrying something. So I went out and helped carry the bags of groceries into the house and set them on the table. Linda dug into one of the bags and came out with a quart of strawberries.

She held the strawberries up and smiled. "I got your favorite," she said. "I even remembered the whipped cream. Sit down and I'll fix you a bowl."

I sat down at the table. Linda put the groceries away, then went to work on the strawberries, slicing the stems free, then halving and washing the berries. She filled a small bowl and squirted a thick pile of whipped cream on top, completely covering the strawberries.

I do love strawberries, but Linda was wrong when she said she had bought my favorite. You can't buy the strawberries I love at any store. Oh, I can eat store-bought strawberries. I mean, they're better than no strawberries at all, but that's about it.

Domestic strawberries aren't grown for flavor, but for size. Some are the size of a baby's fist, and because of travel time and shelf time, they have to be harvested long before they fully ripen. Yes, I can eat them, if I have enough whipped cream piled on top, but they leave a lot to be desired.

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Wild strawberries are another story. Wild strawberries are small, usually not much bigger than a marble, and when allowed to ripen on the plant, they almost melt in your mouth. Wild strawberries are sweet and so full of flavor they make domestic strawberries fade into nothingness.

I spent the first nineteen years of my life in a tiny farming town in east-central Indiana, population 105. Railroad tracks ran through the exact center of town, passing the large grain elevator where corn and soybeans were loaded into the cars. At harvest time, usually most of October and November, the grain elevator ran day and night, and a freight train came through every couple of hours.

The sound of corn being stripped from the cob and shot down metal pipes into the waiting train cars, the chugging of farm tractors hauling corn and soybeans, the lonesome whistle of train engines, and the follow-the-leader banging as a train started pulling the long line of heavily loaded cars to their destination filled the town of Millville with noise. After a week or so, however, the noise seemed to fade as the ear grew accustomed to it.

I was seventeen, and Julie Craig wasn't my first girlfriend, but she was the first woman I'd ever made love to. Julie often talked about marriage, but I never took her seriously, and nothing could have been further from my mind. I owned a car, and on Friday or Saturday night we would drive into New Castle, or Hagerstown, and eat at a McDonald's and then hang out with friends at the bowling alley.

At other times, when the weather was nice, we would walk down the railroad to a woods half a mile from town. There we would picnic next to a small stream. We would talk, make love, pass the day in pleasant companionship.

And we would drink. Like me, Julie was seventeen, but I had a friend who would buy whiskey for us whenever we wanted, and with Julie that was every weekend. And when she drank, it was with the purpose of getting drunk. It was one of the few things I didn't like about her, especially since I didn't drink much and hated the feeling of being intoxicated.

But Julie did like getting drunk, and because of this, I had Randy buy whatever she wanted, and that was almost never beer or wine. Julie wanted only whiskey mixed with a little Coca-Cola. She mixed it in favor of the whiskey, and she would drink until she couldn't walk.

We almost always kept a full bottle of Canadian Mist in a hollow log near the little stream where we picnicked, and if we stayed there long, I could count on Julie getting drunk. I don't know why I went along with her heavy drinking, but I do know she would have dropped me quickly if I hadn't. And while I certainly wasn't in love with her, I liked being with her, mostly.

Once, when Julie was sober, I showed her the patch of wild strawberries I'd discovered three years earlier. They weren't more than a quarter mile from the woods where we picnicked, near a swampy area where few people found reason to go.

Even in the country, wild strawberry patches were rare, and this was only the second patch I'd found. It was maybe fifteen yards long and four yards wide, but held hundreds of plants. Only about three inches high, the plants grew very close together, and you had to move the leaves aside to find the strawberries. No one knew of this strawberry patch except me, and it was a secret I guarded closely.

But eventually, after checking to be certain the strawberries were ripe, I showed it to Julie. Together we sat and plucked the small, red, sweet strawberries from the plants and popped them into our mouths. Julie's eyes widened in surprise as she tasted the first one, and she began picking them so fast I feared she would go through the whole patch.

Wanting to save a few strawberries for another day, I at last stopped her from eating, but only by promising to have Randy buy a fresh bottle of Canadian Mist. He drove to a liquor store just inside the city limits of New Castle and bought two bottles, one for our immediate usage, and a fresh one for the hollow log, though a partial bottle was already there.

Randy never charged anything extra for buying us the whiskey, and he wouldn't buy it for anyone else. We'd been friends for several years, and I never had to ask him twice. I just told him what we needed, gave him the money, and within an hour I had whiskey in hand.

It was just a week later, with nearly all the ripe strawberries gone, but with a couple of hundred only a few days from ripening, when Julie told me she was pregnant. She told me at the worst possible time, and in the worst possible way.

You couldn't walk through the strawberry patch without smashing a lot of plants, and the ones near the middle were almost impossible to reach. I was on hands and knees, my weight resting on the fingertips of my left hand, each finger carefully placed so it wouldn't

smash a plant. With my right hand I was reaching as far into the patch as possible, looking for ripe strawberries we'd missed. I found a couple of dozen.

Julie was sitting on the grass a few feet away, her knees drawn up to her chin. She took the ripe strawberries as I found them, eating a couple and dropping the others into an empty glass. Deciding I'd found most of the ripe strawberries within reach, I moved back beside Julie and brushed my hands together, then reached into the glass for a ripe strawberry.

I held the glass out to Julie and she took a strawberry, but rather than eating it she rolled it around in the palm of her hand, watching as it turned this way and that. Then she looked at me and said, "Jim, I'm pregnant."

She blurted it out just like that. No warning, no softening of the blow. I guess it kind of shocked me or something, because for a time I just looked at her, wondering if she was kidding, and what I should say if she wasn't. "I thought you were on the pill," I finally said. "You can't get pregnant on the pill."

"Yes you can," she said. "But I didn't. I . . . I stopped taking the pill a couple of months ago. It was messing me up, so I stopped taking it."

"God, why didn't you tell me?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

A thought came to mind. "Did you want to get pregnant? Is that why you stopped taking the pill?"

"It was messing me up. But I don't know, maybe I did want to get pregnant. Is that so terrible?"

My mind seemed somehow blank, and the thoughts that came in just bounced around without staying long enough to read. Almost without realizing it, I moved back over to the strawberry patch and began looking for ripe strawberries. Julie was still talking, but the words didn't seem to get past my ears.

I found a ripe strawberry, ate it, found another and another, popped each into my mouth, and continued to look for more. Suddenly, Julie was standing in front of me, her feet in the middle of the strawberries, a dozen delicate plants crushed beneath each shoe.

Jumping to my feet, I grabbed Julie's arm and pulled her away from the strawberries. "What are you doing?" I yelled. "You have to be *careful*. You don't know how easy it is to kill strawberry plants."

Julie jerked her arm free and ran to the middle of the strawberry patch. There she began to kick at the ground with first one foot,

then the other. Her shoes ripped the fragile plants from the ground, sent plants and dirt and unripe strawberries flying through the air. "I don't care how easy strawberry plants are to kill," she screamed. "I tell you I'm pregnant, and all you can do is think about your damned strawberries."

I honestly don't remember the next couple of minutes. When I came to my senses Julie was on the ground and I was straddling her, slapping her face, first with the palm of my hand, then with the back. Her nose was bleeding a little and both cheeks were red. The right cheek was beginning to bruise.

Even when I stopped hitting her, Julie kept screaming. She managed to pull one arm free and began flailing at me with a small fist. I rolled off her, but for a minute she kept hitting me. Then she rolled away. For several minutes neither of us said anything.

"I need a drink," Julie said at last. "I'm going back to get a drink."

She stood up and walked back toward the hollow log. It was a quarter mile from the strawberry patch, and I let her walk half the distance before following. Julie was already sitting down and drinking when I arrived. She hadn't bothered to mix the whiskey with Coca-Cola, but simply turned the bottle up and drank deeply.

"You're a bastard," she said. "I tell you I'm pregnant, and all you do is get mad because I stepped on a few stupid plants. If you were any kind of man you'd ask me to marry you. You'd think about the baby, even if you don't care about me."

The fifth of whiskey Julie held was a little less than half full, but another was tucked back in the log, and I wondered if she would get to the second bottle before passing out. She drank the whiskey in long, deep swallows, coughing only a little. I could see her eyes begin to come unfocused, and hear the slur of her words.

"You're a shombich," she said. "But I'll show you. I'll shue you, by God. I'll make you pay through the noshe for this baby."

Julie finished the whiskey in the first bottle, and by then she was so drunk she couldn't begin to stand up. Nor could she get the second bottle opened. A train whistle sounded in the distance, sounding lonesome. It was nearly dark. It wasn't quite harvest season yet, but a train came through every two or three hours.

Julie finished the first bottle. She was too drunk to stand up, too drunk even to walk, but she was still conscious. I opened the second fifth and held it to her mouth, tipping her head back. She drank, coughed, choked. I let her breathe a minute, then tilted her head

back again. Somewhere along the line she passed out. I poured more whiskey down her throat.

Suddenly she turned her head sideways and began to throw up. The sound and smell of it made me retch, but I forced myself to regain control. Only when I had half the second bottle down her did I stop.

I didn't plan it. I swear I didn't once think about how to kill her. At least not consciously. But I did throw her over my shoulder and start back down the railroad toward Millville. Two hundred yards from the crossing I put her down in the middle of the tracks, her head resting on a rail. Sitting on the rail next to her, I rested, breathing hard from the exertion.

A train whistle sounded and I jumped to my feet. It was fully dark, but early for another train. Looking east, I saw the light of a train engine. It was well over a mile away, but coming fast. I ran back down the tracks, hoping to reach the hollow log before the train reached Julie.

It was a passenger train, and coming too fast. When I saw I couldn't reach the spot I wanted, I climbed over a bank beside the railroad and dropped flat. The train passed me, sounding too close and too loud. Passenger trains ran sixty miles an hour and usually weren't very long. In thirty seconds or less it was past me.

Then I heard the whistle scream long and loud, sounding anxious. A screeching filled the night as the brakes on the train locked and metal wheels ground on metal rails, filling the night with showers of sparks. But brakes on a train are useless for quick stops. It takes a passenger train half a mile to stop from a speed of sixty miles an hour. When I looked down the railroad I could see the train was only then coming to a stop, several hundred yards past the Millville crossing.

With my heart beating fast and my breathing so labored I could hardly run, I hurried the rest of the way to the hollow log and grabbed the half-empty fifth of Canadian Mist. I drank deeply, and kept drinking until the world swam in my vision. I drank more, threw up, drank still more. At some point I either went to sleep or passed out.

When I woke up I felt worse than I ever had in my life. I was still drunk, but knew I had to keep drinking. Two inches of whiskey remained in the bottle, and I drank it all. It was enough to make me pass out again. The next time I opened my eyes it was daylight and two county sheriff's deputies were shaking me.

Things got pretty scary after that. They asked all kinds of questions about Julie, and I told them she had been with me, but walked back home about dark the night before. They told me she was dead, that a train hit her. I cried. The tears were real.

They believed me. Everyone did. I talked to the sheriff later and told him Randy Carter bought the whiskey for us. They arrested him, and under a law I didn't even know about, he was charged with manslaughter. He was sentenced to ten years, and I think he served five.

The funny part was he plead guilty. Randy believed the story I told just like everybody else. He honestly thought he was responsible for Julie's death.

Linda sat the bowl of strawberries on the table in front of me. Picking up the fork, I stuck the tines through the whipped cream and into a strawberry. It was good. Not nearly as good as wild strawberries, but still tasty. I ate until the bowl was empty, then asked for seconds.

"Why don't you wait until after supper," Linda said. "You'll ruin your appetite."

"All right. Guess I'll have a drink and watch a little TV. Can I make you something?"

"Sure. What are you having?"

"Canadian Mist and Coke, I think. Somehow the strawberries put me in the mood."

"Sounds good. Fix me a tall one."

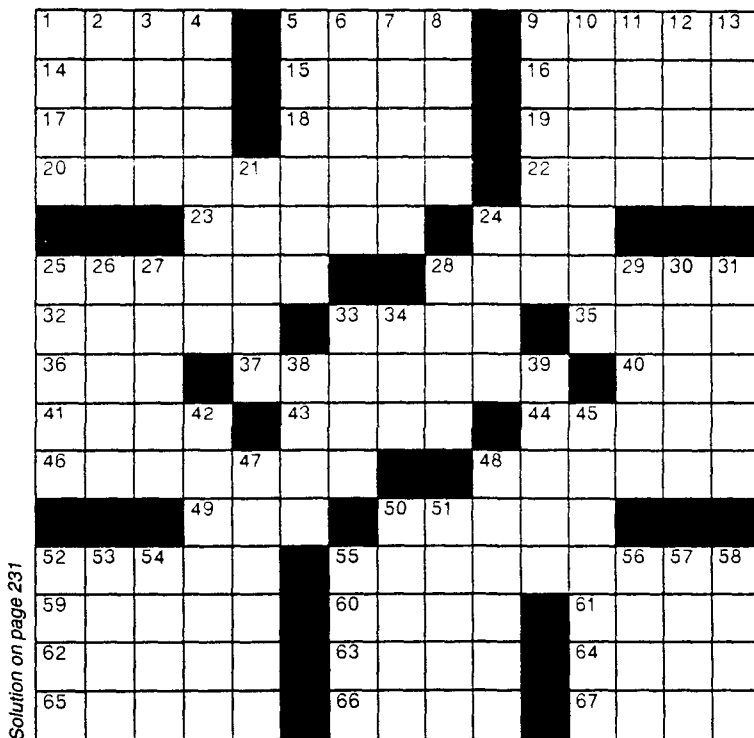
"I'll be right back. Just don't eat all the strawberries while I'm gone."

Going into the living room, I mixed two tall drinks, putting ice in each. I mixed them a little stronger than usual, favoring the whiskey over the Coca-Cola.



THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

by Norma Schier



ACROSS

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| 1. With 52D, 10D, an all-time great; master of the "impossible crime" | 10D 1A's plots |
| 5. Cask | 19. Vinegar (comb. form) |
| 9. Decree | 20. Detective created by 52D 10D 1A |
| 14. Type of lily | 22. Target-shooting game |
| 15. Singles | 23. Lifeless |
| 16. Added clause | 24. Possessive pronoun for Maigret |
| 17. Bound | 25. Sometime description of 20A |
| 18. Ingenious, adroit, like 52D | |

28. Leisurely walks
32. Type of cargo ship
33. Detective created by 52D
10D 1A
35. *Hag's* —, 33A's first
appearance
36. Last (abbr.)
37. Belief
40. Hawaiian dish
41. In back of, as a screen
(comb.form)
43. Current moment (abbr.)
44. Descriptive word for 33A
46. Trudged
48. Dodger
49. Paddle
50. Study of head bumps
(abbr.)
52. Jokes; if singular, *Poison*
In—
55. Epithet for 20A, used not
least by himself
59. Ref. term
60. The South of France
61. Speck
62. Haul
63. Actor Guinness
64. de —
65. Early PI creator for pulp
mags.
66. The Thin Man's lady
67. *Fear is the* — by 52D 10D
1A

DOWN

1. Serene
2. Out of the wind
3. Bellow

4. Repeat performance
5. Impact
6. Close to (poet.)
7. Distributed
8. East, in Madrid
9. Pencil adjunct
10. Middle name of 1A,
pseudonymous last name
11. — fix
12. Batch of badgers
13. Jog
21. Opening part, for short
24. French town
25. *The Plague* — *Murders* or
The Burning —, for instance.
26. One who irritates
27. Beyond the ordinary
28. Narrow opening
29. Ran
30. Inexact
31. Winter athlete of a sort
33. Discover
34. Printer's measures
38. Seashore structure
39. 35A or 67A, for example
42. With feeling
45. 33A's type of moustache
(poss.)
47. Pink or peach, e.g.
48. Beethoven work
50. Mr. Vance
51. Elem. Hebrew school
52. First name of 1A
53. Weapon, for *Devil in Velvet*
54. Scoundrel, Strikebreaker
55. Kind of detective
56. Unjust delay, in law
57. Kind of bomb
58. Neck part

a **NEW** short story by

ROBERT BARNARD

Though he is best known for his comic mysteries, Robert Barnard is equally adept with darker stories of a psychological turn, and his new novel from Scribners, Masters of the House (September, 1994) is of this sort. For those who enjoy Mr. Barnard's lighter side, a new book in the Bernard Bastable series is due out early in 1995, also from Scribners. . . .

THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

by **ROBERT BARNARD**

Simon Carraway's trowel had been expertly flicking cement between bricks with a vigour and purpose which was the result of a newly acquired expertise. Now it slowed down, as the door to number eighteen opened. Simon knew what was going to happen, but he watched nevertheless: the situation at number eighteen interested him, as the doings at none of the other houses in Gordon Road did. The man came out, had his cheek pecked by the still-pretty woman who was the inhabitant of the house that Simon felt he knew best, then the door was shut from inside, and the man, bowler-hatted and carrying a briefcase and an umbrella, set off in the direction of the Underground.

Simon bent his back down again and his trowel resumed its deft slapping-on of cement and its neat placing of bricks. Nothing more to be seen yet awhile.

Simon was nineteen. When he met his former schoolteachers in the street they shook their heads that he had not changed his mind about going up to university. Oxbridge could have been yours for the asking, they said. Simon replied that university, and especially Oxbridge, wouldn't be any use to him. He didn't say, because it

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sounded pretentious if you said it too often, that the reason university would be no use to him was because he was going to be a writer. The only writer he had ever met had told him that any side job a writer took on should be something that did not take it out of him intellectually or emotionally. "Something mindless," the man had said. So Simon had joined his father's building firm as a labourer, putting up rabbit hutches for the newly married, on the site of a former factory in the road named after General Gordon.

His father told people he was working his way up from the bottom. It sounded so much better than that he wanted to be a writer.

Meanwhile Simon stored in his head the personal lives of his work-mates, listened in the pub at lunchtimes to the stories of teenagers and pensioners, watched the people in the old Victorian red-brick houses on the other side of Gordon Road, and made stories out of their lives.

Such as the woman who had just seen her husband off to work. A dull soul, he looked. And Simon knew all about dutiful pecks on the cheek. That was how his father was seen off every morning. But the thing that made the house interesting to him was the question of who the other man in the house was, and what did he do? Was he a lodger? He sometimes left the house, but at irregular times, and often he was—so far as Simon knew—in there all day. What was his work? What did *they* do—he and the wife? And what did the teenage children of the house think about it?

Simon's trowel expertly slapped and smoothed the coffee-cream cement, and his mind buzzed.

Isabella Longthorn shut the front door and leaned her forehead against it momentarily. She did so hope things were going well with William at the office. Desperately she hoped that this was a new beginning. She shook herself and went to the kitchen to wash up the breakfast things. Even if this was not the new beginning she and he hoped for, she would go on supporting and loving William as she had always done. "Loving"—that was not too strong a word to use for a brother. Not loving in *that* way, of course. She felt the force of all the taboos that prevented her loving her brother in *that* way. But in another, a better, a higher way.

She had always protected her younger brother, because she had loved him from the moment when, as a toddler, she had taken the fragile burden of him in her arms for the first time. As he grew up their parents had characterised him as "lazy," "unreliable," "dishon-

est,” and finally “hopeless,” but she had always leapt fiercely to his defence. Since he had returned from South Africa, the joy of having him living with her again was intense, almost overwhelming.

Only Brian had been less than delighted.

As she dried her hands she shrugged. She was not very interested in her husband’s reactions. If he wanted her as his domestic servant he would have to put up with William. And the children—to whom he was something new—were delighted with him. William was staying.

She put on her coat, took up her old-fashioned basket, and went out to do the shopping, casting her usual glance of distaste at the new hutches for human beings rising on what had been the site of a factory opposite.

Brian Longthorn put down his pen as he heard the front door shut. The article for *Rock Monthly* could wait. More important was the selection of records for his Radio Two fifties and sixties nostalgia programme, *The Heartbreak Hour*. He got up and went across the landing to what he called his studio. Here, piled on shelves from floor to ceiling, were the tapes, CDs, and old 78s and EPs that represented the passion of a lifetime. Here he could find every record—well, nearly—of the performers of his childhood and adolescence, along with discarded takes, audition tapes, pirated live tape recordings, and suchlike specialist but delicious items. Much of the more arcane material couldn’t be used on the BBC, worst luck, but just possessing it gave him a delicious thrill. To get in the mood he put on the old EP of “Heartbreak Hotel.”

He loved playing his music when the children weren’t in the house. How they sneered! In fact, he’d got into the habit of only playing it when they were out. They’d got much worse recently, probably spurred on by that no-hoper of a brother-in-law. He still smarted from their parody rendition of what they called “Are You Loathsome Tonight?,” and their horrible pelvic gyrations to “Hound Dog.”

Something stirred in Brian. It was ages since . . . since . . . In fact, not since his brother-in-law ensconced himself in the house. Isabella had said she was going to the library before doing the shopping. She’d be out for an hour at least. His eyes settled on the battered old suitcase. They contained his absolute treasures. The rest were in suitcase after suitcase in the attic. He went and closed the curtains, then switched on a desk lamp and opened the dear old

case. Wonderingly, he drew out the topmost item—the beautiful, spangled, silver-blue suit. Even in the dim light of the lamp it sent out a magic sparkle. His own! Elvis's own! He held his breath for a moment, then quickly removed his old jeans and his striped shirt. The wonderful old trousers were tight, of course—they had been for years—and the jacket felt constricted around the armpits. But—oh, it was wonderful to have them on again!

He went without hesitation to a tape, then set it going on the recorder. As the first bars of "Jailhouse Rock" sounded through the little room he began energetically, sexily, swinging his hips as he mimed to his idol.

On the building site, Simon Carraway was laying carefully, almost lovingly, the first row of bricks on top of the foundation blocks. It was really rather satisfying work, building. When he finished the row he straightened and looked towards the house in Gordon Road. Then he wiped his forehead and looked again. He could hear nothing for the din of the concrete mixers, but he could see dim shadows behind the curtained windows on the first floor of number eighteen. He knew that the woman of the house (he called her Sheila) had gone out, leaving the lodger (he called him Mick) alone in the house. Yet he could see shadows of the torso of what looked like a belly dancer, performing a dance of seduction. Though he could not see the hips, or their shadow, he could see that they must be undulating. Was this Mick's kink? Did he have an exotic Eastern beauty he let into the house by the backdoor as soon as his landlady went out? Where on earth in the vicinity did he find such a creature?

"Something's gone wrong," Isabella thought one evening some weeks later as she watched her brother silently eating his supper. He had not been himself the evening before either. He was normally, once home, a riot of fun and amusement for the children, with the oddest games he had learnt during his travels around Africa, or a series of impressions of the strange people he had met. But tonight he had once again failed to cast off his sober, daytime self and had sunk into thought the moment he had finished his dinner. "Something's gone wrong," Isabella thought. And then: "I shall have to do something for him."

She tried not to think what that might be, because over the years the things she had been asked to do had become more and more unacceptable to her. But she had always done them.

* * *

One evening in late October, clear and surprisingly balmy, Simon Carraway remembered he'd left his Walkman in the workmen's hut on the Gordon Road site. There was a guard there, but a dozy one, and he decided to walk the half-mile from his home (where his dad had ranted over tea about "making something of himself") to retrieve it. He waded through the darkness to the guard, and found it under the bench where he'd left it. He tried it out: nostalgia hour on Radio Two—"Wooden Heart." Yuck! And he couldn't stand the reverential tones of the bore who presented *The Heartbreak Hour*. He turned it off. He found "Wooden Heart" about as exciting as Jeanette Macdonald and Nelson Eddy, and imagined they must come from around the same period. He waved again to the guard and left the site on his way home.

The concrete mixers were still now, but this was London and there was the inescapable hum of traffic and of people living their lives close together. But the windows of number eighteen were open, or the living room one was, probably to let in the cool night air. Simon had never been past the house before when there was a chance of hearing anything from inside it, and as he strolled in the direction of home he slowed down when he neared the yellow-painted front door.

"Yes, of course it's valuable," he heard a woman's voice (Sheila's, surely) say. "That kind of memorabilia fetches a packet these days. But he'd never give it up—never. It's his whole life, poor fish."

Simon walked on. He would have felt awkward if he'd lingered; how could he have explained it? But when he reached the intersection he waited, thought, then turned and walked slowly back.

"But we couldn't, William! We couldn't!"

Simon heard a male voice, but it was an indistinguishable mutter.

"No, of course I don't," came back the woman's voice. "You know that. All that died years ago. But this . . . this is different."

This time the temptation to stop was irresistible, but the male muttering came again, then the sudden shutting of the window. Simon shook his head, turned again, and began the walk home.

A collection—some kind of collection of memorabilia. What sort of collection would that stuffed-shirt of a husband have? Medals? First World War bits and pieces? Cricket trophies? Souvenirs from the Great Exhibition? And what were they planning to do? Steal it?

Because Simon had changed his mind about the lodger, about Mick. He had been wrong about what he had seen. The wife had

gone out shopping by the front door, but what was to stop her coming back in by the backdoor? Depending on her shopping route that could be the most natural thing to do. And he was in no doubt that it had been she doing that exotic dance for her lover, the lodger—one of their kinky games together. Now she and the lodger were planning to rob her boring husband. Or . . .

What exactly did she mean: "This is different"?

Isabella had been appalled when he had brought it up.

"Not safe? Your job? But things have been going so well."

William shrugged.

"Oh, they have. He doesn't *want* to get rid of me. But these are hard times, Sis. Everyone knows that. And the job is safe enough, if only I can get hold of the money to invest in the business."

"What exactly is Mr. Latimer saying?"

"What he's saying is that he needs me to invest thirty thousand in the business."

"Thirty thousand!"

"It's peanuts in business terms. If I can't get hold of it he'll have to dispense with my services."

"But thirty thousand! Where could you get hold of a sum like that?"

He looked at her with his beautiful, steady, blue-eyed gaze. Impossible to mistrust him! Impossible to suspect that there was no job, was no Mr. Latimer, that where he went so impeccably dressed every day was to betting shops and racecourses.

"I thought you might have an idea, Sis."

"Me? Have access to thirty thousand? You must be joking."

"There's Brian's collection."

She frowned.

"Collection?"

"All those tapes. All that fifties and sixties memorabilia he's got stored in his studio and the attic—Elvis's suits, Ringo's drumsticks, all that crap. That sort of thing can bring in a fair bit, can't it?"

"Yes, of course it's valuable. That kind of memorabilia fetches a packet these days. But he'd never give it up—never. It's his whole life, poor fish."

"Greater love hath no man," intoned William, "than that he lay down his life for his Elvis jockstrap."

Isabella giggled nervously.

"Well he would, so you can put the collection out of your mind."

"The ultimate sacrifice could be arranged," said William. "And then the collection's yours to dispose of."

"Oh, don't be silly, William."

He leaned forward, intensely.

"I'm serious, Sis. We could kill him—no problem."

"But we couldn't, William. We couldn't!"

"Why not? Think bold, Sis. You don't have any feeling for him."

"No, of course I don't. You know that. All that died years ago. But this . . . this is different."

"No it's not. It's a seizing of opportunity. Shut the window, Sis. This has got to be discussed seriously."

She got up and banged down the window. Then she turned and confronted him.

"William, I don't know how serious you are, but this is not on. I don't love Brian, but I don't wish him dead. And anyway, I'm not the murdering type."

"You don't have to be. You just have to give me an alibi."

"But . . . but . . ."

"Nothing against a sister alibiing a brother, is there? Not like a husband and wife. I'll be here with you on that dark night when he's on his way home from the BBC and something very nasty happens."

"Stop it, William. There's the children. They'd be home. They'd know I was lying. I couldn't face them knowing that."

"When is half-term? They're going to France on a school exchange, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"Well, there you are, then. When is half-term?"

There was a silence. Then Isabella said: "The week after next."

The houses were beginning to sell. Young marrieds were starting, nervously, to believe the government's talk about green shoots of recovery and were going to banks and building societies to beg for loans. Some, mostly living with in-laws, were willing to move in even while the houses were surrounded by workers and the impediments of a building site.

Simon was working late one day, collecting overtime pay by finishing the brickwork on a house for just such a couple. It was twilight, and the streetlights had just come on.

Through the growing murk he saw coming down Lime Tree Avenue the buttoned-up figure of the husband ("Cedric," as he called him). Suit, bowler hat, briefcase, umbrella under his arm. It was

the route from the number ninety-three bus stop. One block away from Gordon Road the man slowed to a lingering pace, looking around him and upwards as well. There was a high wall at that spot, a telephone kiosk and a lamp standard whose light wasn't functioning. Simon saw Cedric look up at the blank space whence the light should be coming, then nod and resume his walk home to number eighteen.

He's probably meditating a letter to the local newspaper about the council's negligence, thought Simon. Or a call to the council's Highways Department. Prat, he thought. He's the sort of prat who would do that sort of thing.

As the track of Alma Cogan lilted to its conclusion and Brian prepared to put the wrappers on *The Heartbreak Hour* for another week, his mind was on other things. He was fed up with having his damned brother-in-law cluttering up the house. Did he pay rent? Did he do his bit around the house? The heck he did! He was a leech, a limpet, a dead weight. He'd have to be told to sling his hook.

Isabella would cut up rough, of course. Well, he'd tell her she'd have to choose: her brother or her husband. If it came to the pinch, Brian thought he wouldn't mind moving out, finding a flat nearer the BBC for himself and his collection.

One of us will have to go, he thought grimly.

Simon Carraway, in the Public Bar of the Dog and Gun, just off Lime Tree Avenue, was bored. He'd gone there with the men from the site after work, had had a very bad pub meal, and the conversation had now switched from the trouble one of his work-mates was having with his wife to the goal-scoring abilities of Ian Wright. Simon was not remotely interested in football. He took up his pint mug, went to stand in the doorway, and turned on his Walkman. Who in God's name was Alma Cogan? He switched it off and began listening in to the conversation of a party of pensioners round the table next to the door. Someone from the group had died of hypothermia. "Already," they said, as if it would have been quite acceptable if he had died of it once winter had set in. They began in on the personal habits of the deceased, and Simon found himself shaping a character in his mind.

It was over half an hour and another pint later that Simon saw "Cedric" go past the door. He was suited as usual, and briefcased and bowler-hatted, but Simon noted that today he was not carrying

an umbrella. Silly of him, because it had been drizzly most of the afternoon. As he walked on down to the turn-off into Lime Tree Avenue he saw Cedric's hand go into his pocket. Then he turned and was out of sight. Simon turned his mind back to his pensioners.

It was fifteen minutes later when he drained his glass, raised a hand to his work-mates, and left the pub. Ahead of him, turning the corner into Lime Tree Avenue, he saw a jerkined figure that he thought he recognised. He was halfway to the corner when he heard a cry. Running, swerving round it, he saw two figures grappling, and a bowler hat rolling into the road. The lodger and the husband! Throwing himself into the mass of limbs he got his hand on the jerkined figure, forced his shoulders against the wall, then down onto the pavement. Suddenly he realized he was using very little of his strength, that the body was slipping of his own accord. As he pushed the man's trunk down against the paving stones, he realized with a lurch of the stomach that his hands were sticky. Satisfied that the man was not going to make off, he ran to the telephone kiosk and dialled 999.

"Police? There's been a stabbing in Lime Tree Avenue. Send an ambulance too."

As he stood there looking out into the dimly lit street it occurred to him to wonder where the man in the bowler hat was.

"What do you mean 'How's the husband?' " demanded the police inspector who came next morning to talk to Simon on the site. "You know how he is. A nasty stab wound to the side, but he'll survive—thanks to you."

"That's the *husband*?" asked Simon. They looked towards number eighteen, which had a shut-up look and had evinced no sign of life since Simon arrived for work. "I've only *seen* them, you see, from here. I thought he was some kind of lodger."

"Oh no. He's the husband. Presents a programme on Radio Two—*The Heartbreak Hour*. He's got a nice taste in music. I've listened to it now and then when I'm on obbo. They could write tunes in those days. Reckon he'll have had enough of heartbreak when all this is over, though."

"What about the other bloke—the City gent?"

"The wife's brother. He's no City gent. Got a record in three continents. He'd hardly washed the blood off himself when we arrived. There were still traces in the bathroom basin."

"You mean—*he* tried to kill the one I caught?"

"Of course. You didn't *catch* him, you *saved* him."

"Why?"

"Good question. He says his sister put him up to it—wanted shot of her husband. Don't believe a word of it myself. She's a dupe if ever there was one. I think he was after his collection."

"Collection?"

"Fifties memorabilia of the rock stars. Casefuls of it in the attic. Could fetch a bomb in an auction."

"I did hear something a week or two back, when I was going past their window," Simon said, and told him what he had heard. "I think you're right. I don't think she wanted it done."

"*Ve-ry* nice," said the inspector appreciatively. "You're a sharp lad. I like someone who observes the facts. We'll be needing you at the trial."

When he had gone Simon bent over his wall, almost blushing. Sharp, indeed! He'd made a total fool of himself. It took him a while to cool down. The regular motion of placing the bricks, slapping on concrete, then placing another brick on top helped him, calmed him down. He was conscious that over the last few weeks he had come to enjoy the job he was doing. It was not mindless at all, but satisfying, an aesthetic experience. And it made you aware of other buildings—the shape, the size, the feel of them—all built by people like himself. He could certainly get interested in buildings. There was something about them that was solid, unchanging, definite. Something *unhuman*.



EQMM has a long tradition of searching out mystery writers from other parts of the world. During the thirteen years in which EQMM's founder Fred Dannay held his worldwide mystery short-story contests, submissions poured in from six continents and more countries than we can list here. This month we introduce an author known and respected in his native country of Sweden, but previously unpublished in the United States. Gunnar Staalesen is primarily a writer of crime novels, but he has had several of his small collection of short stories translated for EQMM. We begin with a piece that he describes as having a Roald Dahl-like atmosphere . . .

THE CORPSE IN THE ATTIC

by GUNNAR STAALESEN

The air up in the attic was stuffy and stale, the way it usually is in such places; a smell of moth-eaten old clothes, yellowed, dusty books, cardboard boxes from the 1950s tied up with fraying twine, and big empty suitcases made of fiberboard. If they *were* empty, that is.

"Good God, Karl!" gasped Edvard when he got to the top of the steep attic ladder. "Why don't we just take it all straight to the dump?" He ran his hand through his gray-streaked hair, and in the dim light of the attic I saw even more clearly how lined his face had become. I gave a little shiver. It was practically a mirror image of my own face that I was looking at.

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "I think we ought to go through it. We might find something . . . that we think we ought to keep."

After our parents died within a few months of each other, Edvard and I were the ones who had the task of going through the house; sorting out the most important papers; collecting photographs, letters, and other things we wanted to save; dividing up what we thought was worth dividing; and then getting rid of all the rest,

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either by selling it or, as Edvard so aptly put it, by taking it "straight to the dump."

Big houses like this seem even bigger on such occasions. The dressers suddenly have more drawers and the cupboards more shelves. You find little desks and old wardrobes in places you never remember seeing any, but then it was a good many years ago that the two of us had left home. After Dad retired, our parents lived a quiet and peaceful life, and aside from the house and the property it was on, they hadn't really accumulated much of value, so it was a relatively simple inheritance to divide up. We wound up staying friends afterwards, too.

The old house was situated behind the autumn colors of high hedges, on a slight incline. On the neighboring lots there were other old tumbledown castles—and here and there a new house where someone had bought part of a lot that was big enough for two. It had been a quiet neighborhood to grow up in, with big yards and plenty of places to play. In many ways it was a sheltered environment, and we could only remember one great tragedy . . .

We had spent several days going through the house from the cellar all the way up to the top floor, and at the end of each day we felt dusty and grimy. It was with great reluctance that we set up the ladder and climbed up into the attic. The trapdoor was hard to budge, and we had to brace our backs against it to lift it open. The light switch hung on a loose cord from the roof, and when we turned on the light, we stood there blinking our eyes.

"I really don't remember it being this big," said Edvard, looking around in despair.

"I don't either," I replied, hearing the surprise in my own voice.

We hadn't spent much time up here either. Because of the steep ladder and the risk of accidents, our parents had forbidden us to come up here alone; so it was only in their company—plus a couple of perilous expeditions when we had been home alone—that we had ever been up here. The naked bulb below the roof cast a distorted light over the room, giving the boxes and suitcases peculiar contours and sketching odd shadows up across the slanting walls.

"It certainly could use airing out," said Edvard, wrinkling his nose.

I nodded in silence, glumly moving the nearest box. There was nothing to do but get started.

Several hours later we had worked our way over to the wall, deep inside the attic and as far away as possible from the trapdoor. The

light from the bulb below the roof barely reached that far, so we had turned on a flashlight, which lay there lighting up the floor next to us.

Against the wall stood an iron-studded wooden trunk.

"Do you remember this?" asked Edvard.

"No." I shook my head. "It must have been up here from before I can remember."

We glanced behind us. We hadn't found much that was worth keeping. Almost everything was stacked up in a corner of the attic so the moving company could deal with it when they took over. A few personal belongings, some old photo albums, and a handful of books were gathered over by the trapdoor. The old trunk was the only thing that remained.

Edvard bent down. "It's locked," he said as he tried to budge the lid.

"It is?" I stared at the keyhole. It was empty.

I bent down next to him and gripped the heavy, well-constructed lid. It was impossible to get it open.

Edvard straightened up, his back aching and his knees stiff. "There was a crowbar down in the basement storeroom, wasn't there?"

"You're right," I replied. "I'll go get it."

He stood there staring at the trunk. "Don't you think . . ."

"What?"

"Don't you think there's kind of a weird smell over here?"

I took a deep breath through my nostrils and shrugged. "That's how it is in old attics, you know. That's how the old days smell."

Then I went down to get the crowbar.

When I came back up, he was sitting on top of the trunk.

He was two years younger than me, and we had spent an undramatic childhood together. He had become a teacher and was married, with two children. I worked in an office in the county administration building, and I had a wife and three kids, a boy and two girls. We had been lively, fun-loving boys, and we grew up to be staunch, middle-of-the-road, middle-class men. His hair was going gray; I was in the process of losing mine.

Neither of us had any intention of moving back into our childhood home. We had each settled down in our own neighborhood in modern single-family homes with good friends and neighbors. We could get a nice price for the empty house, particularly because of the location—and divided by two, we would each get a handsome sum, which

would give us the opportunity of "fixed assets." He was thinking about a motorboat; I needed a new car.

Our parents had been proud of us. We had both grown up to be well-established, decent citizens without causing them any great sorrow or worry.

I dropped the crowbar to the floor and said, "Here. You try it first since you're younger."

He got up from the trunk and picked up the crowbar. He stood there weighing it in his hand. It was heavy—I'd noticed that on the way upstairs.

He tried to poke the pointed end of the crowbar into the lock itself, but it hit metal, and he couldn't get a firm grip on it.

"Try a little to the side," I suggested.

He did as I said. The crowbar went in farther this time, and he shoved against it, leaning his weight into it. The lid of the trunk creaked, but the lock still wouldn't give. "You're going to have to help me," he gasped, his face flushed.

"Move in closer to the trunk," I said, going over to stand next to him. We counted to three and put all our weight on the crowbar . . . once, twice, three times . . .

The lock yielded with a sharp snap, and the lid of the trunk sprang open and slammed against the wall behind. A nauseating grayish-white dust rose up in a cloud from the trunk—and an odd, sweetly rotten smell billowed toward us.

We stepped back from the trunk in one simultaneous movement, and I could feel my stomach churning. There was something about that smell . . . It wasn't just the smell of the attic—it was the smell of something stronger, more dangerous. It was the smell of death.

The cloud of dust quickly settled. Edvard stood there staring at the trunk as if he half expected an ancient phantom to rise up out of it. I leaned down and picked up the flashlight. I aimed the beam at the trunk. From where we were standing the trunk appeared to be empty.

We looked at each other. Then we moved closer—one step, then two.

Finally we could see all the way to the bottom of the trunk. It took a minute before we fully realized what was lying there.

At the bottom of the trunk was the shriveled-up, partially decomposed body of a child. The skin was like old rotten leather, and the skeleton could be glimpsed in places. The clothing had deteriorated and it was difficult to tell what it had been. And yet the same

thought and the same name rose up inside both of us. We looked at each other with horror and shock in our eyes. Edvard stammered, "V-V-Vilhelm?"

I nodded mutely in reply.

I still remember—as if it were yesterday—that gorgeous, sun-filled summer day almost thirty years ago when Vilhelm disappeared. It was the only tragedy that ever happened in our neighborhood during the whole time we lived there, and the memory of it had haunted us throughout a large portion of our lives.

Vilhelm lived two houses away from us, and agewise he was exactly between Edvard and me. The three of us were pals, and we made that section of town our own. The eight or nine trees behind our property became endless forests, the incline down toward the village creek became a slope leading to the Indian village. And in the summer we built a hut out on the island in the fish pond when we could swim out to it.

On the afternoon that Vilhelm disappeared we had been playing hide-and-seek. I had hidden under the cellar trap door, and when no one found me I came out on my own. Then it was my turn to be "it," and Edvard and Vilhelm took off and hid.

It was a sunny, quiet afternoon—a Sunday. In the surrounding houses our parents were taking a nap after lunch. From a porch a short distance away we could hear faint music from a radio, and up in the eaves little birds were chirping cheerfully in the pure blue summer sky.

I counted slowly to fifty. Then I started searching. Edvard I found right away—he was lying under the hedge facing the neighbor's house to the west. But Vilhelm we couldn't find anywhere. I asked Edvard whether he had seen where he went, but he shook his head. We ran down toward the "Indian camp" and bushes around it. No Vilhelm.

We were too young to be worried. We sat down near the fish pond for a while and threw pebbles. He'll turn up when he gets tired of hiding, we told each other. But he didn't turn up. And we didn't know then that we would never see Vilhelm again.

When we thought we had waited long enough, we started calling him. "Vilhelm! Vil-hellm!" But there was no answer.

"Maybe he went home."

"Let's go over there and find out."

We went over to Vilhelm's house, but he hadn't come home. His mother and father came with us to look for him, and now the news spread rapidly from house to house: Vilhelm was missing. Our parents came outside too and joined the search. But it was as though Vilhelm had been swallowed up by the earth. We were asked time after time: Where had we seen him last? Where had we been earlier in the day?

Finally someone called the police, and the search escalated.

The days following Vilhelm's disappearance were gloomy and anxious. His name was in the paper along with a picture and description—at first as an ordinary missing-persons notice, but when it became clear that he really *was* missing, the notices got bigger. Edvard and I were both old enough to read the papers, and our eyes widened and got tired from reading all the theories about what might have happened to our friend.

Most of the theories hypothesized an accident. The fish pond was dragged and the length of the creek was too. The neighborhood was combed in search of old wells, manhole covers, or other death traps—but without results. Houses were searched from cellar to attic, but Vilhelm was nowhere to be found.

Then the theories began to shift toward the idea that a crime must have been committed. Could the boy have been kidnapped? Had anyone observed any strangers in the neighborhood? Had anyone heard a car?

These questions were never answered, and Vilhelm stayed missing. His disappearance remained an unsolved mystery all the way up to that moment in the dusty old attic when we two middle-aged brothers stood and stared down at the corpse of what had once been our little ten-year-old playmate.

I remembered his parents—during the years that followed. We would hear his mother night after night, as she walked by out on the road between the houses. She would be calling his name, as if he had merely forgotten to come home for the night, for months afterwards. Finally she gave up, and after that we never heard her say a word. She seemed to shrink before our very eyes. His father we saw very little. He would drive up in his car after work and sit inside all afternoon and evening. The grownups said that he drank, and he died quite young.

Edvard looked at me with a grim expression. "He must have slipped up here, hid in the trunk, and then the lid fell down. Maybe he was knocked out, and then the lock clicked, and since there was

no key to the trunk, he couldn't open it. Later . . . they didn't bother to search hard enough."

I nodded but was slightly taken aback. "*Can* locks like that actually click shut?"

He looked at the trunk and the lock and gave a big shrug. "I have no idea. Come on. There's nothing more we can do up here now. Not today. We're thirty years too late, Karl."

He pulled me away and over to the trapdoor.

Halfway down the ladder a new idea occurred to me. "What if—if he sneaked up here alone, then the trapdoor would be open and the ladder would be down, wouldn't they?"

He walked ahead of me into the living room. There, in the middle of the table, lay a couple of pictures we had put aside: two old, framed photographs of our parents—Dad with his rough, wide face; Mom's oval face with her hair pinned up.

Their eyes met ours across the table, and I realized that we were thinking the same thing. We remembered our kind but unpredictable father and the violent outbursts of rage he would have if anyone happened to disturb him during his afternoon nap; and how several times he had hit both Edvard and me so hard we could hardly stay on our feet. And we remembered our wise, sensible mother, who had always been so good at covering up whenever he got out of control.

—translated by Stephen Murray



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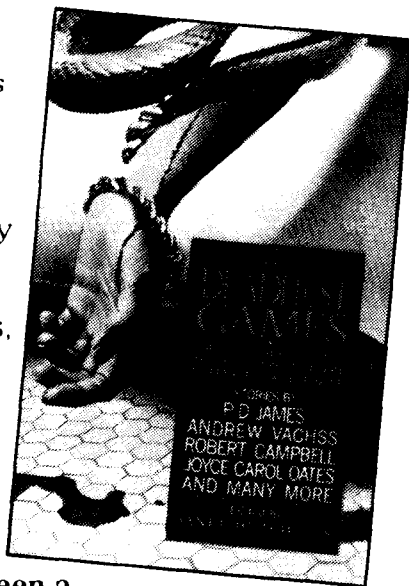
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a **NEW** short story by

TERRY MULLINS

Terry Mullins's stories often involve the arts or literature in one way or another, but this derives not only from his having made his career in the arts (the Philadelphian is a retired editor) but from his addiction to research. His new piece for EQMM deals with one of the hazards that may face a curator of rare and valuable objects . . .

TWO FEET OF STEEL

by TERRY MULLINS

As he heard a distant church bell striking twelve midnight, Edward Clipton straightened the pages before him and laid his pen on top of them. His wife had gone to bed an hour earlier and he had promised to follow soon, but he had found several ridiculous errors in the galley proofs of the museum's forthcoming catalog and correcting them had taken far longer than he had expected.

Stiff and irritated at the printer's inability to follow simple instructions, he rose from his desk and started across the room. Before he reached his study door, it opened and a masked figure entered pointing a pistol at him. It motioned for silence and for him to turn around. He did so and was quickly blindfolded and gagged. His hands were tied and he was pushed forward.

They went out the front door of his house and he was not permitted to stop until the feel of asphalt was under his feet. He could hear the sound of a car motor running. There was the sound of a door opening and he was shoved into the backseat of an automobile. In moments the car was under way.

The drive was not a long one. When it ended, he was pulled from the car and hurried into a building. Even before the blindfold and

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gag were removed, he knew where he was. He was in his own museum. Briefly he wondered what had happened to Renelle, the night watchman. In the half darkness of the exhibition room, he found out. The man beside him removed a ski mask and appeared as Renelle himself.

"What do you want?" Clijton asked.

"The Rembrandt, of course," Renelle replied. Cold, unsmiling, phlegmatic as ever, the watchman led the way to the museum vault.

Dimly the shapes of Dali's mad fantasies, Demuth's hard abstractions, Miller's bloated figures, and Ecter's flashy constructions appeared and disappeared as Clijton and the night watchman crossed the room and entered a hall hung with Hopper's stark commentaries on American Victorian buildings and the frozen people who inhabited them.

Renelle opened Clijton's private office door, ushered him in, and crossed to the museum vault. There he loosed Clijton's hands.

"How did you know?" Clijton asked.

"I've had three months on this job to look at everything on display. There's a lot of valuable stuff out there, but the Rembrandt's a copy, an almost perfect copy but a copy just the same. So the real Rembrandt must be in the museum vault. Open it!"

Silently Clijton cursed the board's folly in cutting costs: one night watchman instead of three, no time locks on doors or vault. It had cost them comparatively little to have a first-rate copier make a reproduction of the only multimillion-dollar painting the museum owned and put it on public display. The original was brought out only on special occasions.

Renelle became impatient. "Open it!"

Clijton approached the computer keyboard reluctantly. He tapped out the entry number and then spun the computerized dials. He opened the huge steel door. Inside a light came on automatically, giving the first clear illumination Clijton had seen since he left his home.

Renelle quickly found the wooden case containing the Rembrandt. He thrust Clijton into a corner of the vault, left with the painting, and shut and locked the vault. Suddenly Clijton was in complete darkness, the afterimage of the vault's light still dancing in his brain. He blinked, but it did no good. He rubbed the places on his face and wrists where the bonds had left throbbing indentations. He could feel no cuts. Apparently he was undamaged.

He pushed at the vault door without result. Two feet of steel door refused to budge. Then he settled down to wait. The air conditioning which kept temperature and humidity even in the vault should keep him from suffocating, so he expected nothing more than boredom and frustration.

But the absolute darkness did not permit boredom. Clipton had always considered himself a night person. He liked to walk out under the night sky in the country or sit on the roof of his Manhattan apartment and watch the dark shapes of transcontinental jets pass across the velvet canopy that even lights of the metropolis couldn't paint. But absolute blackness was another matter. He had never felt so cut off from all that was human.

He opened and closed his eyes. As the darting images of retinal shock subsided, a feeling of helplessness gripped him. He couldn't come to terms with the fact that it didn't matter if his eyes were open or shut. It was one thing to have a blindfold holding his eyelids shut. Psychologically, it was another matter altogether to open one's eyes and see nothing, nothing at all.

Over a lifetime, he had become accustomed to the change from darkness to light—some light at any rate—which accompanied opening his eyes. To have that not happen was like having the laws of the universe suspended. He tried to quit blinking. He tried to ignore the darkness. There was nothing he could do for another six hours at least.

He might as well sleep. Take advantage of the dark. Close his eyes and sleep. But why close his eyes? The whole point of closing one's eyes is to shut out the disturbing stimulus of light. It would be a mockery to shut his eyes to help him sleep in here.

All right, keep them open and go to sleep. That proved to be impossible. He was too conditioned to going to sleep with his eyes closed. So close them and go to sleep. Absolute darkness and absolute silence should put him to sleep quickly.

But there wasn't absolute silence. The steady but muffled whir of the air-conditioning motors penetrated the vault. It was, of course, a reassuring sound, but it soon became an annoying sound. What if they stopped? The vault was small. There might be four hours' supply of air but never six. And if they stopped, could he stand absolute silence as well as absolute darkness?

It wasn't the same. He could do something about the silence. He could talk, sing, clap his hands, kick the vault. No, stop that. The

motors hadn't ceased. It was insane for him to be talking, singing, clapping, and dancing around as if at a party.

Just sit still and wait for morning. He propped his back against the side of the vault and tried to go to sleep. Gradually he brought his thoughts under control. He was in a stressful situation. He didn't try to deny that. And the usual way to deal with stress was either to alter the situation and destroy it, or to run away from it. He could do neither. Since he couldn't alter the situation's impact on him, he would try to alter his response to the situation.

Actually, meditation might be better for him at this point than going to sleep. Meditation would reduce the consumption of oxygen. So would sleep, but not so much and not so quickly. Meditation would also cut down the amount of blood lactate. That should help. He would begin by contemplating something. At first he focused his attention on the bronze Buddha in the exhibition gallery.

No sooner had he chosen it as his object than he concluded he ought to assume the same position as the statue. He found it distracting to try to contemplate a statue which was in the lotus position while he himself had his back propped against a steel vault with his legs stretched out in front of him.

So he tried to assume the lotus position. He couldn't do it with his shoes on. He took them off and realized immediately that the vault was cold. That shouldn't be. The air conditioner was delicately adjusted to keep temperature and humidity at a constant level. But the vault was growing cold. There was no doubt about that.

He put his shoes back on, stood up, and reached up as close to one of the vents as he could. He should be able to feel a slight movement of air even if he couldn't reach the vent itself. He felt nothing. And he realized that Renelle had clogged the air-conditioning system so that he wasn't getting any air at all. That was why the motor sound was muffled. Being unable to shut the air conditioning off, Renelle had simply stuffed something into the air ducts.

That meant there might not be enough oxygen in the vault to last until the museum opened.

He fought down an automatic reaction of panic.

The darkness, the increasingly cold darkness, pressed in upon him with an almost physical pressure. He had no idea how much time had passed. Without matches, without an illuminated dial, he had no objective measure of time.

Then he realized that the air in the vault was already becoming thicker. There was a cold, moldy, musty smell, like a crypt in a cemetery.

"I must meditate," he told himself. "I need the lower consumption of oxygen which comes from meditation." And the more he told himself this, the tenser he got as he found that he could not meditate.

He shook himself, deliberately tensed all his muscles and relaxed them one by one. He inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly three times. He tried again to concentrate on the statue of the Buddha and found that it didn't work. He was distracted by the lotus position, by the position of hands and fingers, and by the sensually withdrawn expression on its face.

He tried to concentrate on his own navel and found himself thinking about his belt buckle pressing on his navel. In this absolute darkness, contemplation of visual objects was proving impossible.

He tried sounds. Briefly, he tried losing himself in reciting the Lord's Prayer, but despite his desperation, he was unwilling to use prayer as a mere technique, as a tool for self-help. He changed his approach, using "Om Mane Padme Hum" with more success, but came to the conclusion that it was *too long* for real meditation. The rhythm of chanting it suggested tunes with a similar rhythm and he had to fight against turning the mantra into a jingle with irreverent words.

At length, he settled for repeating ONE softly under his breath.

And then there began a singular transformation of will. Clipton gradually achieved the state of relaxation he sought, and as he automatically repeated the word ONE, he spent less and less energy vocalizing the word and it became subvocal. Although the sound remained the same, his mind changed the word, it became WON, the same sound but with different associations.

As hours passed, the air in the vault became more and more fetid. His lungs pumped more slowly and with greater and greater difficulty. Seated as he was on the floor with his back to one wall, he could reach the wall on his right and his feet could touch the opposite wall. He was thus dreadfully aware of the narrow confines of his prison. At times they seemed to be closing in on him, and the word which he continued to mutter under his breath seemed to echo off the steel walls around him.

In spite of all attempts to keep his mind blank, memory of the outside world intruded with scenes of past light and laughter which taunted his present state. The very word he was using for relaxation betrayed him. ONE. WON. WON. Scenes of contests which he had won came to his mind.

The final moment of the hundred-yard dash he had won at college rushed in on him. There was the same difficulty breathing, the same exhaustion of spirit. But then there had been light, the hot sun of a Virginia spring day. He had not been alone. There had been people shouting and cheering. There had been coaches and teammates supporting him as he gasped and stumbled. There had been the feel of red earth beneath him as he sank to the ground. He had won. WON. WON. WON.

The end of a tennis match came to him. Several sets had seen games go to deuce again and again. Both players were worn out. A blister on his thumb had him using the Australian backhand in the last game. On match point, his opponent had dropped a dying ball inches over the net. He had charged it from mid-court and hit the ball when it was at the top of a sad bounce. His return hit the net and fell on the other side. There had been exhaustion. He had collided with the net and sprawled onto the red clay court. But there had been light, people, voices, and hands, and help. ONE. ONE. He had won. He won one.

Something was wrong. Cipton shut off all thought. He stopped repeating that insidious word.

That was all in the past. Here there was darkness. Here there was the cold metal vault. Here was two feet of steel shutting him off, perhaps forever, from the sun, fresh air, friends, human voices, help.

Hours passed and he had no way to count them. The air in the vault began to suffocate him. The waiting was interminable. Nothing happened. The air got thicker. The hideous darkness stretched out to infinity. And behind all the suffering was the knowledge that no one knew he was there except his murderer, the man who had locked him in. With foul air crushing his chest, Cipton rose and threw himself at the door of the vault. As he did so, he realized that he could breathe a bit better—not much, but some. For a moment he held the wild hope that he had jarred the steel door and air was rushing in. But there was no movement in the air of the vault, no current of warmth. Instead, he discovered that the couple feet of difference between sitting and standing had made a difference in the amount of oxygen available.

He felt cold sweat forming in beads on his forehead and trickling into his eyes and down his cheeks. If the air was becoming unbreathable that fast, he had only hours to live and he must keep standing.

He tried to breathe slowly, tried to relax, tried to meditate. But panic had already begun to grip him. With each effort to relax, he was just holding panic at bay. In desperation he tensed his muscles and deliberately relaxed them again. It helped a little, but less than before. It staved off panic for a while.

Time seemed to stretch on endlessly. Hope faded. A pernicious lethargy crept over his body. His senses dulled. A torpid acceptance of death touched his mind and, when forced away, returned with greater force and increasing frequency, sapping his will.

He realized that he was becoming insensitive to the cold, to the hard press of the vault door against his body, to the very darkness itself. His consciousness was less and less of reality and more of weird possibilities. Unreal and spectral shapes filled his imagination. Fantasies, grotesque semi-dreams crowded into his mind. His normal fear and pain gave way to abnormal obsession with the slow beating of his heart, the sinister trickle of sweat down his body, the useless whir of the useless air conditioner.

When the sound came, he was almost unconscious of it. Like a searchlight penetrating fog, the sound fought its way through his confusion. Somewhere doors were slamming. There were footsteps; people were walking. Then he heard voices. Henry Brian, his secretary, was speaking in a loud, complaining voice, a voice which Clipton had heard him use to subordinates when Henry thought his boss was out of hearing. The day watchman was answering.

Clipton struggled to consciousness. The intercom between his office and the vault was working. If he could hear them, they should be able to hear him.

He shouted. He screamed. There was no response. The sounds from the office continued as before. Henry was badgering the day watchman to account for Renelle's absence.

"He just wasn't here when I arrived."

"Were you on time?"

"I was on time, a bit early in fact."

"Mr. Clipton will have something to say about this. You know you are supposed to take over from Renelle."

Clipton called out until he was hoarse. The conversation continued uninterrupted by Clipton's clamor. Gradually he accepted the fact that the communicator had been damaged. He could hear them, but they could not hear him. He beat on the steel door.

He reached down and took off a shoe. As he bent down, he breathed air from near the floor. He almost passed out. Standing again and

with his head held face up like a swimmer trying to keep from drowning, he leaned against the door and pounded on it with his shoe. Noises on the other side stopped. He struck with the shoe again.

He heard Henry ask, "Did you hear something?"

Clipton pounded even harder.

"There it is again."

"It's coming from the vault. There's someone in there."

"Of course there's someone in there," Henry snarled in disgust. "That fool Renelle has got himself locked in. He'll simply have to wait until Mr. Clipton arrives to let him out."

"But how did he get in?"

"I don't know. Perhaps old Clipton forgot to lock the vault. It serves Renelle right if he's locked in. He should have reported to Mr. Clipton and closed the door. He had no business going in."

"But, Mr. Brian, I don't think Mr. Clipton would leave the door open."

"He shouldn't, but maybe he just forgot. Still, we ought to tell him. I'll call his home and tell him that he was careless and left the vault unlocked and Renelle has got himself shut up in it."

There was a brief silence and then Henry's voice resumed, "Mrs. Clipton, this is Henry Brian. May I speak with Mr. Clipton, please. Yes, I know he should be in the office now but he seems to be late and the night watchman is locked in the museum vault. No, I don't think it is a matter for the police. As soon as Mr. Clipton arrives with the combination, we will let the night watchman out and probably dismiss him. He should have . . . No, I really don't think we need to . . . Yes, if you insist, I will call them. You don't have to come down here. It's not terribly important. Mr. Clipton will take care of it when he . . . All right, I'll call right away."

Clipton beat on the door again.

"Oh, shut up, Renelle. You've caused enough trouble. Now she's coming down here and Clipton will let her upset the whole routine the way she always does."

"Hello, police? This is Henry Brian of the Clipton Museum. Our night watchman has got himself locked in our vault and Mrs. Clipton said I should call you. No, Mr. Clipton has not arrived as yet and when he does, we'll let the night watchman out. There's really no need for you to send anyone . . . Very well, do as you like."

All this while Clipton had been breathing slowly and trying to relax. The air in the vault was foul. He heard the sound of normal

activity in the next room. Henry was berating the day watchman again. Then heavier steps approached. There were other voices, Henry speaking with two other men. As the others entered the room, Clipton could make out what they were saying.

"How do you know it's the night watchman?"

"Because he wasn't here when the day watchman arrived."

"But neither was the boss, was he?"

"No."

"Isn't he usually here before you?"

"He should be."

"So maybe both he and the watchman are in there."

"Hey! You in there, can you hear me?"

Clipton beat on the door.

"He can hear us all right. Wonder why he doesn't say anything?"

"He can hear us because of the intercom, but the line from there to here is broken."

"How long has it been broken?"

"It was working all right yesterday."

"I'll say it's broken. Someone smashed it. Something is not right here. I'm going to call our locksmith to open the vault."

"But Mr. Clipton will open it when he arrives."

"Not if he's in there with the night watchman. They could die from being shut up in that little thing."

"There's no danger of that. The vault is air conditioned."

The officer called for the locksmith and then said, "I wish there was some way we could communicate with them in there."

Henry said, "But there is. We can communicate the way we do with the dead."

Clipton gasped, choked, and forced himself to do shallow breathing.

"How's that?"

"In a seance one asks questions and spirits of the dead respond by rapping on a table or something. I'll show you." Then his voice changed to a hollow wail as he said, "Give one rap for No and two for Yes. Do you understand?"

Clipton pounded twice.

"See? He hears us. Are you all right?"

Clipton slammed the shoe against the door violently.

"I imagine he is a bit upset, maybe even afraid. Is that you, Renelle?"

Clipton hit the door again.

"Did you hear two raps, Officer? I thought I only heard one."

"There was just one. It was clear enough. That's not your night watchman in there. Maybe it's Mr. Clipton. Give it a try."

"Are you Mr. Clipton?"

He pounded twice.

"Are you alone?"

Two more blows.

"Then where is Renelle?"

Clipton, trying to do shallow breathing, found himself cursing in a way that used up precious oxygen.

"He can't answer that yes or no."

"That's right. I forgot. I get so excited when I speak with the dead that I sometimes make mistakes."

"Ask if the night watchman locked him in there."

"He wouldn't have done that. He leaves as soon as the day watchman arrives and Mr. Clipton doesn't open the vault until . . ."

"Just ask him."

"Oh, all right. Did Renelle lock you in?"

Clipton pounded twice.

"That sounded like two raps."

"It was two raps. Your night watchman locked your boss in there and ran away. I'm going to report this to the lieutenant. We'll look for this Renelle."

At that point other steps sounded and the officer explained the situation to the lieutenant and a locksmith.

"This is a computerized lock," a new voice said. "Before we can begin to turn the dials in the usual way, we must feed the key number into the computer. Even then the dials do not drop tumblers in the usual way. I couldn't detect the tumblers dropping into position. My equipment is useless. We'll have to blast that vault open."

"But there's someone in the vault."

"That's too bad. We can't blast. Who has the combination?"

Henry spoke again. "Mr. Clipton, who is in the vault, is the only one who has the combination except for the chairman of the board, and he's in Frankfurt, Germany."

"Can you reach him?"

"I can't, but I can give you his home phone number. Maybe someone there knows where he is staying."

Clipton nearly collapsed. He didn't have long to live. The atmosphere in the vault was becoming fetid. He had only minutes left.

"Mr. Clipton's wife is here. Shall I let her in?"

"Hello, Mrs. Cipton. We'll have your husband out shortly. Do you know the combination?"

"No, but he does."

Henry's voice interrupted. "He can hear us, but the line out of the vault is broken. I'll tell him you are here."

"Henry, get away from that microphone."

"But I'm his only contact with the outside world."

"Get away! Edward, what's the first digit of the key number?"

He pounded twice.

"See, he can only answer yes or no."

"Shut up, Henry. The first digit is two. What's the second?"

He pounded three times, then twice, then three times.

"The key number is two, three, two, three."

"Got it." The locksmith's voice. "Now get the combination."

"Is the first number to the right?"

He pounded twice.

"What is the number?"

He hit the door twenty-seven times. The exertion was overcoming him. It was hard even to hold the shoe but he knew that if he dropped it, he could never bend down and get it back.

"Then how many to the left?"

He struck the door eighteen times, fighting to breathe, fighting to retain consciousness, fighting to summon enough strength to wield the shoe.

"How many to the right?"

Somehow he continued. The frantic pounding on the door died down to a slow and heavy swinging of the shoe, hitting the door, and then resting.

"That's it, Mrs. Cipton. That's the last number. I'll open the door."

At first he thought he was falling unconscious on the floor. He struggled to stay upright. Then he realized that the vault door was moving. A sudden burst of light almost blinded him. Fresh warm air poured over him like a shower. Instinctively, he stumbled toward his wife and wrapped his arms around her.

But his first words were not for her. His first words were, "Henry, you're fired!"



To celebrate the upcoming Halloween holiday, we offer a tale that skirts the edges of the supernatural. The story also adds to our pantheon of international figures, for it comes from a native of Uruguay and is translated by Donald Yates, an authority on South American literature who has translated eight EQMM stories. . . .

THE TELEPHONE

by **AUGUSTO MARIO DELFINO**

On the low table in the hallway the telephone has been silent since four in the afternoon. Hebe glances at it and says to Berta, her younger sister, "No one has called."

Berta gives a little shrug and, glancing in turn at the telephone, notices the wilted roses in the crystal vase on the table. They have been there since Hebe brought them the day before. Berta recalls the details of that moment. It was eight-thirty in the evening and Hebe had been out. She returned with the roses wrapped in waxed tissue. Before kissing her mother, who was reading the paper in the living room, and without saying a word to Berta, she got the vase, went to the kitchen to fill it with water, came back, and began arranging the flowers. It was then that the telephone rang. Hebe answered it. Berta heard her say:

"Yes, Papa. Enjoy your dinner. Have a good time."

Berta approached her sister.

"Did he say he wouldn't be coming home to eat?"

"A couple of friends have invited him out. Let Mama know."

At nine-thirty they sat down at the dinner table, just the three of them. They turned on the radio; they rambled on about vague, trivial matters. It was ten o'clock when their brother Alberto arrived. Displaying his characteristic moodiness, which fluctuated between intensity and indifference, he overrode the maid's annoyance, saying:

"Amelia, serve me everything all together and don't bother heating anything up. I don't have much time because this is going to be the most important night of my life."

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His mother regarded him reproachfully, as if to say: "When will you stop behaving like a child?" But she said nothing, knowing that Hebe and Berta enjoyed indulging his extravagances.

They had just finished their coffee when the telephone rang. Amelia answered it.

"It's for you," she said to Alberto.

"Didn't I tell you?" he exclaimed boastfully. And he strode from the dining room as if the actual physical presence of one of his girlfriends were awaiting him. The four women heard him utter, "But it's not possible!" Then they could hear nothing more because he lowered his voice. He reappeared, his face looking drawn and tense.

"Alberto!" his mother demanded. "What's wrong?"

"A friend, Mama. Maybe my best friend. He's just had a stroke."

"Who is it?" asked Berta.

"You don't know him."

Hebe said nothing. She rose and went to her room, shutting herself away, while her mother, her sister, the maid, and the cook—women joined together, disturbed over Alberto's secret somewhere out there in the night and the city—guessed at the identity of the victim, speculated on the degree of seriousness, in somber, fearful tones.

It was after eleven when the telephone rang. Berta went to answer. Hebe, who had been lying on her bed, sat up and listened. Her sister's voice confirmed her suspicions. When she came out of her room, Berta was saying:

"No, Alberto. You're hiding something from me."

"What's he saying? What's he saying?" her mother called out as Amelia, awakened by the ringing of the telephone, appeared, wrapped in her bathrobe decorated with large red flowers.

Berta hung up the receiver. She turned her eyes away from her mother and met Hebe's gaze.

"Papa is the sick person."

"I knew it," said Hebe.

Afterwards, there was nothing to do but wait. The mother accepted whatever Amelia said in her effort to cheer her up and allay her fears. She herself sought the consolation of describing a night thirty years earlier. Hebe was then an infant. Her husband had gone out, the first time he had done so at night in seven months. She had fallen asleep in a chair next to the child's cradle. The telephone awakened her. It was a friend calling to tell her not to be worried,

that Juan had suffered a dizzy spell and had been taken to a hospital, and that he would be coming home as soon as the spell passed. When the friend hung up, she cried, cried out loud to the point of alarming the neighbors, who knocked in vain on her door. When Juan came home a short while later, he found her unconscious on the floor with scarcely a pulse. Berta, who had heard the story countless times, listened without paying attention. She was tensely waiting for the telephone to ring. Hebe, who had taken refuge in the bathroom, ran water in the sink to cover the sound of her sobbing.

At daybreak Alberto arrived. He was with two friends. He said nothing. He held out his arms to his mother and wept. Afterwards—Berta remembers this as she watches Hebe pick up the vase and the fallen rose petals from the table—everything was effortless and strange. The morning brought on a feeling of great weariness. And sleepiness, an overpowering sleepiness that she had to struggle against. Amelia arrived with the newspaper, took out the milk bottles, served coffee, raised the blinds. Alberto had gone out. When he returned, he asked about their mother. Hebe said:

“She’s asleep. She had to have another shot.”

Alberto asked the women to stay in their rooms until the wake could be prepared in the living room. An hour—perhaps two—later he said:

“It’s all right now.”

Berta wanted to forget. She wanted to erase the memory of a day and a night and half of the next day, to forget her home full of people, full of flowers, then with only a few persons who spoke in muted voices. She wanted to forget Hebe rejecting the attentions of Horacio, her fiancé, to forget how Hebe, taking her by the arm, led her into the kitchen and there, amidst cups holding the remains of coffee, astonished her by saying:

“Do you remember Enrique Arenal? You must. Of course, you were very young then—twelve or thirteen. He was that boy who lived next door on Serrano Street. I’d like him to be here now.”

What had gotten into Hebe? Was it possible that on a night like this she could be thinking of a man so removed from everything? No doubt it was she who had asked him to come. Enrique Arenal must have been the stranger at the wake who had spoken but a few words with Alberto. *How changed Hebe seems! It will be better if she breaks up with Horacio. Why go on with something that would end up making them both unhappy? But it’s all too soon*, she thought.

Papa liked Horacio. Ending the engagement with him would be like betraying Papa.

Hebe has returned with the empty vase. Berta can wait no longer to ask her not to commit that selfish betrayal.

"Hebe—" she says.

The telephone rings. Like someone snatching a weapon from the hand of a madman, Berta grabs the receiver. Hebe takes it from her firmly, gently.

"I'll answer it," she says. "Hello!" She falls silent, turning pale. The words she is hearing seem to bring a throbbing to her cheeks. This accentuates her pallor. Her motionless lips, from which the blood has drained, appear pale even through the glistening red lipstick. Hebe's gaze falls on Berta, who persists in standing there. With the expression of one who is persuaded after offering great resistance, Hebe concedes:

"Yes, this is Hebe. But of course I recognized you. Your voice is the same. But I can't believe it. No, I just can't . . . No honestly, it makes me happy but very sad at the same time. You're all right, you say? Well, we're doing the best we can, considering the terrible thing that has happened. A trip? You're trying to make me feel better. A trip is different. A trip promises a return. No, I just can't accept it. Poor Mama. . . . She's sleeping."

Hebe lowers her voice. Berta turns to reassure herself that the house is immersed in silence.

"Yes, a lot of drugs to make her sleep. Before that, early in the morning, she acted as if she didn't understand that something frightful had happened to us all. Anyone would have thought that she wasn't suffering in the least. Closer to us, do you say? I can't hear you very well. Yes, I know it's not the noise. Just the opposite. Your words sound fuzzy. Hello! Hello! There, now I can hear you. How can you say that? Why wouldn't I forgive you? No, I'm the helpless one, who can't find the words to tell you what I want to say. . . . But the only thing I want to know is that you are happy, content. . . . There's a noise now. What is it? Trains? You're talking from a station. Are you alone? Oh dear, poor thing. . . . Berta's here, beside me. I'll tell her. Yes, in those words. No, Alberto has gone out. Something he had to do. Urgent, he said. No, we're not alone. Aunt Carmen is here, too. She'll stay with us and spend the night. The Oddone sisters just left a moment ago. Do you remember them? They used to live around the corner on Serrano Street. Maria looks very old, but she's still the same, the way she used to be. But you

should see Elisa. A pound of makeup on her face, like a clown. . . . But how can I be talking about these things now? On a day like this. No, I'm not crying. What makes you think I am? You think that's funny, don't you? You think I'm crying and looking ugly the way I did when I was a little girl. But you . . ."

Hebe is weeping now. The tears roll down her cheeks, forming two glistening streaks.

"I just can't bring myself to say that word. Afraid, you say? But I always loved you. I love you now. No, what can I expect to find in Horacio? He probably doesn't realize that he means nothing to me now. I could lean on a chair, on a wall, on anything but him. You have to go? Please don't, not yet. Don't leave me alone." Alone because Hebe cannot see her sister, who is regarding her with surprise, with pity, with scorn. "I have so many things to say to you still. No, it's not the same. It's not the same that you already know it. I have to say them to you. Hello! Hello! Can you hear me? It's terrible, those trains again. What do you care if that man is coming down the platform for you? Be calm. Don't worry about that. I'm strong and I won't. What? Not ever again?" She cries out as if she had been struck. "Never again?"

"Hebe, are you out of your mind?" Berta says to her. "Give me the phone. That's enough!" But she withdraws her gesture when she sees that her sister is smiling, when she sees in her eyes the expression of a tenderness that she does not understand.

"That's all? Just good night?" says Hebe. "Yes, rest. Rest peacefully."

She replaces the telephone receiver, but without releasing it. Then her hand opens slowly in the movement of a strange and beautiful creature. Berta is standing there. Hebe sees her once more. Hebe says:

"It was Papa."

—translated by Donald A. Yates



a **NEW** short story by

TOM TOLNAY

Another story in honor of Halloween comes to us from small press publisher and printer Tom Tolnay, who reflects here on a potential hazard of his trade. Letterpress printing has become an art kept alive by only a smattering of publishers in the United States and Europe, but it was of course the primary means of printing in the 1830s, when this story takes place . . .

SATAN AND THE PRINTER

by **TOM TOLNAY**

The printer arrived at daybreak, lifted the iron door latch, and let himself inside. His face was wan, his eyes shot with red. In the faint, frosted light he hung his jerkin on a wooden peg, then wrapped his apron around him. A tug secured the leather visor over his head, which was covered with wiry, rust-colored hair. Motionless as he estimated the number of rough-edged sheets on the shelf, he became part of the stillness around him, nothing more, it seemed to him, than an inanimate implement of his trade.

Since winter had not fully seized the village, and since he was expecting more manuscript to be brought to him that morning, he decided not to take the time to lay a fire in the stone chimney. He moved sluggishly to the far wall, climbed onto a long-legged stool, and lit the oil lamp. A greenish light hesitated over the work counter before sketching a pale halo, quivering, on the ceiling. He cupped his hands around the glass globe of the lamp. Soon his fingers became warm enough to handle the tiny bits of type without fear of dropping them.

At arm's length were two galleys of type. Though made up of hundreds of separate elements, they looked like solid rectangles of

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lead. His hand brushed over the closest galley, pushing down several letters which had worked up higher than the rest. From this evenness he'd often derived a sense of order that helped prepare him for the start of a long workday, but this morning his heart felt as if it were filled with a fistful of the weighty type.

Four months earlier, after a brief courtship, the printer had taken a wife. It was during the time he'd come into his own as a printer, after years of apprenticeship, when he was commissioned to set in type and print stories by a brooding, reclusive author who lived not far from his shop. As soon as the couple had carried their belongings into the white cottage on the leaf-strewn lane, it seemed to the printer that his bride began to behave strangely, often unaware of what went on around her, absorbed in her own thoughts. The groom had become increasingly uneasy, yet he cherished his wife above all else, and desired to reach across the dark gap that seemed to lie between them like a freshly dug grave.

The previous night the printer's wife had moaned repeatedly in her sleep, and once had even cried out, startling him. A wave of protectiveness had carried over him as he lay beside her under the broad quilt, which had been pieced together as a wedding gift by the patient hands of his mother. But the printer slept very little the rest of the night. His father, with whom he'd served his apprenticeship, slept more peacefully on his hill at the foot of a round-shouldered granite marker.

At dawn, when the printer and his wife arose, he asked her what fearsome dreams had troubled her sleep. Her eyes moistened, but she would give him no answer so, shaking his head, the printer dressed and pulled on his boots. When he had finished a breakfast of tea and fresh-baked bread, he took his wife's hand and explained that he must go—that the author was coming to his shop with another tale to set in type.

Exhaling puffs of white air, the printer placed the wooden composing stick across the palm of his left hand. Before beginning to set the type he gazed out the window. The low sun was bundled in charred clouds, casting a leaden glare over the commons. Not a soul moved about on the brown turf, not even at the village pump. The trees were still. The meetinghouse, shut tight. Leaning forward, he could see the great gabled house set back off the lane, huddled under a veil of crystallized dew. In the topmost window, a candle flickered: The author was already at work.

The printer suppressed a yawn as he centered himself before the wooden type case. Now he studied the handwritten manuscript, held flat by an iron bar, and began plucking individual letters out of the compartments of the case. His hand moved swiftly, assembling the prose. Line after line stacked up like a wall of miniature bricks. Character and scene and plot took shape, but the printer had to give close attention to the accuracy of spelling and punctuation, and so he often could not follow the intrigues he set in type.

Once the composing stick was fully loaded, the printer set it on the counter, gripped the four sides of the type with the fingers of both hands, and slid the type onto a galley. Here it was tied together with linen twine and pushed up against another block of letters that had been set the previous evening. Normally he took satisfaction in this physical record of his labors, but this morning his head throbbed with exhaustion.

Nearly a full page of thirty picas had been set when there came a knock on the door. Except for his own tinkering with the metal and wood, there had been no other sound in the vicinity of the shop. The knocking sounded again, more urgent this time. He had not expected the delivery of the manuscript quite so soon, and he glanced out the window toward the gabled house. The candle in the upper window was still lit. Carefully he laid the composing stick down on the counter, moved to the front of the shop, and unlatched the door.

A square-shouldered stranger loomed in the dimness of early morning. He was draped in a black cloak, and wore a broad-brimmed hat which shaded much of his face. In the clawlike hand was a crooked walking staff.

The printer, surprised, stuttered: "What may I . . . do for you, sir?"

"I have come to do something for thee."

Dry leaves rattled in a huckleberry bush beside the door.

"I fear I do not understand."

"Satan walks among us," the stranger declared, using his staff to make his way past the printer into the shop.

Uncertain whether to be annoyed or interested, the young printer followed him. "If Satan is your business, why not go down among the black pines, where they say he keeps his fire?"

The stranger eyed the printer icily and replied: "His shadows have been witnessed in *your* window."

"My window? That is not possible."

"It has been reported in good faith."

"By whom, may I ask?"

"Members of your congregation."

Forcing a laugh through his nostrils, the printer said, "As you can see, there's no Beelzebub here."

The stranger's green eyes hopped like a pair of toads as they examined the darkest corners of the shop.

"Sir, my work cannot be delayed any longer," said the printer.

The figure in black shook his staff. "I have come to find Satan, and find him I shall!" he exclaimed loudly. The charged voice and wild gesture reminded the printer of the new minister who preached in their meetinghouse with the passion of a sinner. But this man was too tall, and his clothes curiously antiquated.

Moving deeper into the shop, the stranger leaned over the imposition stone and sniffed the dried ink on its surface. Next he confronted the printing press, though not too closely, raising his eyebrows at its oak frame, its iron lever, its stone bed. In particular he seemed wary of the threaded shaft which created the pressure for the impression.

"Who are you?" the printer demanded.

"Guardian of thy soul."

"With God's help I shall keep watch over my own soul."

A cynical laugh croaked deep in the stranger's throat. "Against the hand of Satan you cannot possibly succeed."

The printer stepped toward him. "I must ask you to leave."

Uttering the Lord's name, the stranger walked heavily to the counter against the wall, where the printer had been composing. He bent over the blocks of type.

"Do not disturb anything!" ordered the printer.

A foul sigh escaped from the stranger's mouth, and before the printer could stop him, he had reached out and overturned a galley of type. The pieces of lead splashed over the timber-planked floor with an explosive clatter.

"Fiend!" shouted the printer, and grabbed his arm.

Puffing up like a crow in the cold, the stranger pulled away and swung his staff, striking the printer on the side of the head. The young man's knees buckled and he fell onto the planks. Now the stranger overturned the second galley of type.

The printer pressed the palm of his hand against the side of his head, feeling too dazed and weakened by the blow to get up.

"Satan's work is undone!" roared the stranger as he flapped out the door.

The silence flowed back, pouring over the worn edges of the press, and the sun, a silvery presence against the gray backdrop of sky, polished the scattered pieces of metal. The printer felt helpless—not against the figure in the cloak but against the rubble of disorder: the countless hours of labor strewn around him. From where he sat shivering on the planks, he could see a row of type that was larger than all the rest, missing letters, out of alignment, yet readable: “Y_{ou} g C^{oo}dman Br_{own}.”

For a few moments the printer felt confused, uncertain of what to do. He had an impulse to scoop the piles of type onto the galleys, to begin the laborious process of checking the face of each letter and sorting it into the appropriate compartment in the case. Instead, he pulled himself to his feet, tore off his apron and visor, and hurried to the front of the shop. He pulled on his jerkin and strode out the door.

Past the meetinghouse he saw a figure in black moving down the path that led into the woods. The printer began running after him. By the time he reached the edge of the woods, the cloak had disappeared, and so he stopped beneath a spread of bare, twisted branches to rest and gather his thoughts. Remembering the tremor in his wife’s voice that morning, the tears in her eyes, he looked back down the dirt road. But his cottage was too far off to be seen.

When his breathing was normal again, the printer followed the path into the woods. Under the shield of wilderness the sky grew darker, the air cooler. As the bushes crowded closer to him, the path faded under his steps. In his confusion, he thought he was passing a rock or a stump that he had passed minutes earlier. Silken white flowers clustered at the edge of the marsh, though it was the wrong season for bloom. A heavy branch let go and crashed on the bed of the woods. A jay cackled insanely. The printer’s head throbbed, and he could not get his last glimpse of his wife’s fair hair from his mind.

Sunk in a gloomy hollow, through a ring of dense, black-needled cedars that turned morning into evening, he caught sight of the glimmer of a fire, and he could hear voices. At first he thought they were singing a hymn, but as he drew near it sounded more like a chant. He entered the circle of light and saw the stranger in the cloak, both arms raised: the scarf no longer covered his face, and the fire in the pit revealed a dark stain across his left cheek. Behind him was a semicircle of men, women, and children, but they stood

far back, their faces hidden in the shadows. The chanting stopped.

"Come," the stranger called across the clearing, waving the printer towards them. "Come and join your neighbors, your friends, your family."

"Nay, my people would never be part of such an unholy gathering," spat the printer.

"Approach the fire and you shall see them better."

The printer held his ground, but then the flames leaped red and yellow out of the pit and he saw the faces of members of his congregation, including the pious old woman who had taught him his psalms. And the lad, son of a neighbor, who sometimes helped him gather firewood. The bony-faced deacon stood among them, too, in his familiar, worn gray coat, head slightly bowed.

"What say you now?" the stranger demanded.

"I do not believe any of this!"

"Ah, then look closer still."

Now the printer saw his mother among them, wrapped in her knitted brown shawl, her face withered by years of sacrifice; in a moment his father, wearing his ink-stained leather apron, stepped out of a group of sullen figures.

"Father, Mother!—how come you from both sides of the grave to be in this fiendish place?"

Neither of them replied.

"Come and enter our circle," the stranger bade.

"It is all a terrible dream," said the printer, backing up.

The stranger laughed, a gurgle that seemed to boil up out of his intestines, and then the printer saw her—his kind and loving and bewitched wife.

"Constance!" he shouted, but she did not seem to hear him.

Leering at her with sharp crow's eyes, the stranger raised his hooked fingers and beckoned, and the printer's wife obediently stepped out of the coven. When she stopped beside him, the stranger lifted his shaggy arm like a huge black wing and unfurled it across her shoulders. The fair young bride seemed to shudder under its spread, but did not move away.

The printer's face filled with blood, and he began to stride across the fire-lit clearing. Noticing his approach, his wife let out a faint shriek and retreated, becoming a shadow among the dark configuration of sinners. Now the stranger flung the cloak off his back, and in a flash there stood in his place a chalky-faced, dark-haired woman in a burial winding-sheet.

Though he was amazed by the transformation, the printer continued to move toward the figure in the burial wrappings. The woman began to unwind her sheet, baring a dry shoulder and blue breasts, but in the blink of an eye the printer saw a bent, white-haired man standing in the spot where the dead woman had been. The old man was holding a vase filled with clear, sparkling fluid, and he peered at the printer.

Shivering more from confusion than from the cool morning air, the printer paused in mid-stride. But now the old man stepped close to him and extended the vase with both hands: "Take a drink of sweet sin," he rasped, "and you shall never grow old."

Instinctively the printer reached out to receive the sparkling fluid, but the clawlike hands reminded him that the old man with the vase and the woman in the burial sheet had been conjured by the stranger in the dark cloak—miserable magic, evil tricks to cloud his mind. Determined not to be fooled by dark spells, he slapped the vase out of the old hands, spilling the fluid and leaving a black stain on the dusty earth.

The old man let out a long, low wail, as if the air had been let out of him, and shrank down until all that was left on the place where he'd stood was a writhing fat green snake.

The printer backed off, frightened, and searched for his family beyond the fire. But his wife, father, and mother were not among the villagers. Then he noticed the stranger's walking stick lying beside the fire. Quickly kneeling, he grasped the crooked stick and slid it rapidly across the ground, catching the snake and sweeping it into the pit: The serpent hissed as it sprawled across the tongues of fire, which flared up in thick sulfurous flames.

A cry of horror rose from the villagers, and when the billowing smoke disappeared, the printer was alone in the clearing.

It took a long while to find his way back through the wilderness, and by the time he reached the main street of the village, his lungs were pained by rapid intakes of cold air. But his head no longer throbbed from the blow of the stranger's walking stick. The sun had untangled itself from the clouds, melting the frost. Now there were a few people out on the commons gathering kindling for their morning fires, filling buckets with water at the pump. On the steps of the meetinghouse the deacon, in gray coat and cap, was wielding a straw broom briskly. With no letup in his stride, the printer watched him intently.

At the schoolhouse he turned down the lane, crunching dry leaves and twigs like the wings of birds underfoot. He arrived at his cottage in a few minutes. Opening the door, he found Constance seated in a straight-backed chair beside the fire in the hearth. She was mending a pair of his trousers.

She looked up in surprise and said, "You are home early, John."

"Did you go out this morning, Constance?"

"Where might I be going in such a cold mist?"

"To meet someone in the woods."

"No," she protested, "I have not done so," and setting her sewing aside, she rose from her chair.

"Yea, I saw you with my own eyes," he said sternly. "You have been behaving . . . oddly . . . these many weeks."

"Impossible!" she cried. "I have not stepped outside the door. It is you who have not been yourself, John. I have not slept easy since you took this new work."

The distress in her voice and the honest glimmer in her eyes suddenly softened the young husband and he moved to embrace her. "Forgive me," he mumbled into her hair, but he decided to tell her nothing of the stranger's visit.

At the rough but sturdy structure that housed his shop, the printer came to a halt, released the door latch slowly, and entered cautiously, surveying the efficient space before closing himself inside. No type was scattered across the floor, and his apron and visor were on pegs, not lying where he remembered dropping them earlier in his haste. But the tall stool was over on its side. Gingerly he pressed the side of his head, and winced from the pain. On the counter he saw the oil lamp flickering over the new type, which was tied with twine in the galley trays, a full page completed, just as he'd remembered.

Lifting the stool upright, the printer climbed up on its seat. He scratched his wiry head in bewilderment, then leaned forward and looked out the window across the lane. The candle in the window of the gabled house was out.

For a long while the printer stared out at the irregular roofs and windows of Salem, which shimmered in the glow of morning, and there appeared in the distance a man with receding hair the color of oak leaves in winter, a thick moustache, and dense, moody eyebrows. He was carrying a leather pouch under his arm. Disturbed by the approach of the author, the printer glanced toward the bolt

on his door. But his eyes came to rest on the printing press, and in the stillness of his workplace, in the soft golden light of morning, the firm footing of its frame and the harmonious balance of its oak, iron, and stone struck him all at once as beautiful . . .

Centering himself on the stool, he began to pluck letters out of the type case, sliding them left on the composing stick to form words and sentences. And ideas. His hand moved quickly, accurately, and his fingers did not stop until he heard the knocking on his door.

The printer turned and called, "Come right in, Mr. Hawthorne."



Patrick Ireland first appeared in EQMM's Department of First Stories only six short years ago, but he writes with a polish and assurance many more seasoned writers might envy. The California resident creates for us here a protagonist with an imagination as far-reaching as his own, but for his character, the proclivity to fantasize holds unexpected dangers . . .

WINDOW SHOPPER

by PATRICK IRELAND

Hamilton slid into his seat on the first-class deck of the 747 and, for the hundredth time in the last six months, thanked his lucky stars. It was still hard to believe he'd landed such a job. A career like this was one in a million, and he owed it all to his penchant for daydreaming.

He'd always had a vicarious streak in him, finding hours of entertainment just by perusing the classified ads in a Sunday newspaper, poring over the miscellaneous for sale items . . . the situation wanted section . . . the pets column . . . lost & found . . . and that most precious of all fine print, the personals. The classifieds were an endless source of amusement for Hamilton. And sometimes more than mere amusement. He'd located his apartment, adopted a cat, and purchased his car through newspaper ads. He'd even found romance. Several romances, in fact. But it was his present job that had opened a whole new world for him. He'd spotted the ad in the help wanted section, and it had changed his life. Moved him from mere daydreaming into the real world, where his life had meaning.

As an international courier, Hamilton was paid to hand-carry sensitive information back and forth between the worldwide offices of a global network of stockbrokers. Information which couldn't be trusted to electronic communications. He'd felt rather ridiculous when he'd applied for the position, never honestly expecting to be hired; but the idea of world travel as a career was magnetic to him, and to his great surprise and satisfaction, the background required

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was far less specialized than he'd anticipated. Really, nothing more than reliability and punctuality. Before he'd even had time to be amazed by his luck, he was on the payroll.

He settled himself into the seat and glanced out the window at the scurrying figures of the ground crew as they readied the plane for takeoff. He smiled at the thought that only a short time ago he'd gladly have accepted such menial employment as those fellows'. Instead, he was now a man of distinction. A world traveler. And, while his salary was, admittedly, rather modest, millions of dollars in investment capital depended upon him alone. To think that up until six months ago the high points in his life had been moments of pretense! Ah, but he'd been very good at pretense. Once he'd become expert at fooling himself, he'd found great joy in fooling others.

It was a source of pride to him that he'd been able to convince so many unsuspecting persons of so many different things. And the wellspring of these dupes was the ever-provident classified ads. He'd find a yacht for sale, say, or a Lear jet. Something extraordinarily expensive. It was then a simple matter to pretend interest in the purchase thereof. An appointment would be made for a demonstration, Hamilton would arrive fashionably late, and permit himself to be courted and catered to by an anxious seller. Then, at the psychologically correct moment, he'd decline the purchase.

"Frightfully sorry, old stick, but I'd had something a bit more elaborate in mind. No, really, I couldn't hazard a lower offer. Simply not done in my family. Couldn't bear to insult you. I'll just be trotting then." It gave him a perverse delight to bask in the discomfiture of some pompous jackass who happened to be down to his last million or two.

And then, of course, there were the ladies. The ones to be found in the personals. And that was another story.

With a self-indulgent sigh he turned his attention away from the window to a magazine he'd found left in the seat next to his. Flipping through the pages, he felt a familiar tingling as he realized that it was devoted exclusively to elaborate advertisements for exotic automobiles, each ad accompanied by a color photograph. His eyes skipped eagerly from page to page, reveling in such automotive exotica as Maseratis, Shelby Cobras, Lamborghinis; even, astonishingly, a Deusenberg. Truly, while they held the lion's share of space, the Rolls-Royces and Mercedes rather paled in such sophisticated company.

His pulse quickened; in one full-page ad, no expense had been spared to attract a buyer for a pair of vintage Porsche 904 GTS race cars. Lean, black brutes, alien to his eyes, they seemed to spring from the page with a life of their own; ferocious beasts, starving for victory and possessed of the speed to capture it under any circumstances. He was entranced.

The tone of the advertisement was affectedly complacent, calculated to pander to the most conceited temperament. The price, a mere \$250,000 the pair. Hamilton gagged, eyes bulging at the glossy photo. The last sentences were a rather sardonic little jab at the common person: "Call for appointment to see and appreciate. If you can afford to even think about buying these cars, you can certainly afford to fly to Zurich, Switzerland, for the firsthand look they deserve."

Hamilton took this twist of the blade personally, finding himself rather short of breath at such arrogance, and it came to him that the business trip he was on would afford him an opportunity to repay in kind. Zurich, in fact, was his destination. And he was exactly the man to handle this singular bit of pomposity. He whiled away the hours in flight absorbed with the magazine and its breathtaking photographs.

Upon reaching London, he telephoned ahead to Zurich as he awaited his connecting flight.

"Yes, that's right. The eleven A.M. flight from London. I'd appreciate it if you could pick me up at the airport. The name's Lyle Hamilton. Thank you." He allowed himself to smile.

Debarking from the plane in Zurich, he noticed a uniformed chauffeur standing at the foot of the escalator, holding a carefully lettered slate. MR. HAMILTON, it read. He nodded at the chauffeur. "I'm Hamilton," he said.

"First name?" the chauffeur asked, professionally suspicious.

"Lyle."

The chauffeur smiled slightly and nodded back. "This way, Mr. Hamilton," he said, leading the way to an elegant 1928 Pierce-Arrow limousine. Complete with enclosed passenger compartment.

Hamilton sank into the glove-soft leather and relaxed, smiling at the proffered bottle of Dom Perignon and permitting the chauffeur to fill his cut-crystal champagne flute. Sipping the magical nectar as the limo silently surged along, he gazed at the scenery flowing past the window. To the south, beyond the Zurich See, the Swiss

Pre-Alps stood in timeless elegance against an impossibly blue sky.

He wished Joyce could see him in this setting, whisking along in champagne-splashed elegance across the incomparable Swiss countryside. But of course Joyce could never see him. Not anywhere. Never had seen him. Because Joyce knew him only from his letters. And the phony photograph he'd sent in response to her ad in the lonely hearts section of the classifieds. She was his latest of many. None of whom had ever met Hamilton. Except, of course, the first one. Her disappointment on meeting him had been so humiliating that he'd resolved never again to meet any of his mail-order conquests in the flesh. It was too likely to be as painful as that first and only time. Besides, through the mail, he could pretend to be anything he chose; play any role he might dream up. And he could dream. Oh yes, he could dream.

In the role he played for Joyce, he was an international wine consultant. It was almost too perfect, now that he had this courier job. He'd been able to post letters to her from all over the world. Rome. Athens. Paris. Berlin. And now Zurich, where he was in the midst of playing out another little fantasy.

He refilled his glass with champagne and chuckled smugly, confident that his host would not see through his guise of affluence, since his job required that he dress well at all times. And the locked briefcase he carried would lend authenticity to his pretension. When the time came to decline the purchase, he would pull it off in grand style. "Sorry, old stick, these aren't quite what I'd had in mind. They looked much better in the photographs. If your man will just see me back to the airport, I've got to be in Linz on the morrow. Thanks awfully. Cheerio!"

The limo was approaching a grotesque wrought-iron gate, having turned from the main road some way back; Hamilton hadn't noticed just when. He straightened his necktie and assumed his air of haughty particularity. As the gate swung smoothly open to admit the limo, he covertly scanned the surroundings. Imposing gray stone walls stretched away on either side of the gate and out of sight into deep woods carpeting the rolling hills. The gate must have been radio controlled, for as the limo passed through, it swung closed at once, though no gatekeeper was to be seen. Around a sweeping curve a mile or so beyond the gate, the road plunged into a tunnel and Hamilton found himself suddenly in darkness, his self-assurance eroding somewhat. He fumbled for the intercom, wondering vaguely what he might say to the driver. Before he could locate it, the tunnel

was behind them and the road snaked on through dense woods of hemlock and fir, random shafts of sunlight bursting through the green canopy of leaves and turning the tarmac into a crazy quilt of light and dark. Hamilton cleared his throat self-consciously.

Breaking out of the dense woods, the road straightened and sliced through a lakeside meadow dappled with blue and yellow wildflowers. It seemed the limousine was finally approaching his destination; an impressive stone manor house situated on a hill amid manicured lawns and hedges, commanding a view of the mirrorlike tarn. As the limo crunched along the graveled circular drive before the house, a pair of huge black and tan rottweilers appeared and loped at an easy gait alongside. Hamilton's bowels turned to ice water. He was terrified of dogs. Always had been. And these brutes looked as if they'd been bred in hell. Squarish, heavily muscled bodies, seemingly chiseled from glossy black stone; short muzzles with open jaws from which lolled tongues that looked to weigh at least four pounds each. And the teeth. Good God, the teeth! Each mouth contained a veritable butcher shop of specialized instruments for the rending of flesh and crushing of bone. Watching the powerful muscles bunching and gliding beneath the animals' sleek coats, Hamilton shuddered as he imagined those savage fangs in action. He was rapidly becoming convinced that he had no business in this place.

The driver stopped at the foot of a flagstone walkway leading to the porch and set the parking brake. He slid from behind the steering wheel and stepped down to be greeted by the panting dogs, though, in truth, the greeting seemed to be more an inspection of the chauffeur than a joyful reunion. Evidently they approved, their stumpy tails wagging slightly. The two of them accompanied the driver as he strode to the rear of the limo and opened the door for Hamilton.

Hamilton tried to swallow his fear. He'd heard that dogs can sense apprehension and it makes them more aggressive. Although he couldn't see how these monsters could be any more aggressive than they already were; they seemed to be in charge of the present situation, as if he and the driver were subordinate to them, rather than the other way around.

Quaking, Hamilton stepped from the limo and the dogs converged instantly upon him. He stood rigid in terror as they prodded and snuffled at him, the coarse fur rippling along the napes of their

massive necks. Holding his breath, Hamilton prayed silently that they would not detect his rising panic.

A tall man leaning on a cane appeared in the doorway of the house and after a moment's observation spoke commandingly.

"Loki! Fenris! *Setz dich!*"

The dogs obeyed instantly, sitting erect and motionless as statues, though never taking their eyes from Hamilton. The man strode from the porch, the ferrule of his blackthorn cane rapping against the flagstones with every other step. He reached Hamilton and extended his right hand.

"Herr Hamilton? I am Lothar Achermann. A pleasure to meet you. Please forgive my dogs. They are very protective." Achermann's accent was thickly Teutonic, as was his appearance. About forty, over six feet tall, and powerfully built, his close-cropped black hair showed the merest trace of gray at the temples. His icy blue eyes offered little cordiality, though a smile occupied his craggy face.

Hamilton took the hand and tried not to wince as Achermann clasped his and gave one short, brutal squeeze before dropping it.

"So," Achermann said, looking Hamilton up and down appraisingly, "you have come to see the 904's, yes?" His eyes came to rest on the briefcase.

This was it. Hamilton discovered he was trembling and cleared his throat raspingly. "Well, yes, of course," he muttered, for some reason unable to meet Achermann's eyes.

Achermann raised his voice to the chauffeur. "Heinrich! We will go to the track now." He urged Hamilton back to the limousine. Heinrich held the door, standing stiffly at attention as the two of them entered. To Hamilton's great relief, the dogs stayed behind.

Once inside the limo and rolling, Achermann wasted no time in getting to the point. "You have brought the money?" He nodded toward the briefcase. Hamilton cleared his throat again; things were moving rather more rapidly than he'd bargained for. In the presence of this aggressive man, his composure was melting away like a child's sandcastle under the rising tide.

"Well," he hedged, "let's just say I came prepared."

Achermann, though, was not about to be satisfied with such temporization. "American currency?" he demanded, prodding the briefcase with his cane.

In the face of such obduracy, Hamilton was unable to rally his pretense of disdainful superiority. He was barely able even to reply.

"May I see the cars first, Mr. Achermann?"

Achermann grinned mechanically. "Of course. Of course. As you will see, they are perfect. They have won many concourses, many races. You will find no fault with them."

He made this last sound like a command, and Achermann was obviously accustomed to being obeyed.

"Perfection, Herr Hamilton, is everything to me," he went on in tones worthy of a drill sergeant.

"It is not my way to be content with mere excellence. Only perfection is good enough for me." He paused, noticing Hamilton's gaze upon the blackthorn cane.

"Ah, yes. You make note of my cane. As well you may. A racing accident. Not my fault. Another driver collided with me as I was overtaking him in a tight turn. He was killed, and rightly so, the fool. Unfortunately, my leg was permanently damaged. And so I must contend with an imperfect body. You will agree, this is a great joke, yes?"

Achermann barked mirthless laughter. It was not a pleasant sound, rather like that of a butcher splitting chops with a cleaver.

Hamilton began to perspire, remembering the isolation of this estate and the fact that his presence here was unknown to anyone. Desperately, he sorted through his store of excuses for backing out of purchases. None were anywhere near suitable for such a forceful man as this. Indeed, most were calculated to deliver a thinly veiled insult to the would-be seller. He didn't dare insult this man. In fact, he didn't see how he could decline without admitting his imposture. And even this alternative was frightening. There was no telling what a man like Achermann might do if angered.

The limo was easing down a gentle slope which overlooked an oval track. Alongside the track stood a low metal building with many large doors, all of them closed.

"My test track and garage," Achermann was saying. But Hamilton's eyes were drawn to movement from one end of the structure. Bounding toward the limousine were three more rottweilers. His throat contracted in an involuntary effort to swallow, but the dryness of his mouth permitted no more than a dull clicking sound.

"As you can see," Achermann continued, "my cars are well guarded." He rolled an eye toward Hamilton and his teeth showed behind a twisted smile. "You know, these animals are remarkably efficient feeders. Not unlike a school of sharks, they can dispose of large quantities of raw meat and bone in very short time."

Hamilton's tongue felt like hot sandpaper as he unconsciously licked his lips. There was little doubt as to just what raw meat Achermann was referring to. By now, the huge dogs were alongside the limo, effortlessly keeping pace as the driver wheeled onto the concrete apron in front of the garage. He stopped before a door marked with the stallion rampant arms of Porsche. Achermann opened a panel in the walnut liquor cabinet. Inside were a dozen or so numbered buttons. He pressed one and the sectional steel garage door began to rise. Lights came on inside the bay, and Hamilton's eyes were suddenly filled with the glossy black 904's. The lines of their radical design bespoke the same aggressiveness as did Achermann himself. They were pure racing machines, with no concession to such banalities as fashion or ornament. Every curve, every line and contour of them was optimally functional; and the obvious function of the sum of their parts was speed. Yet, in an almost unearthly way, they were beautiful. Incredibly so. The photographs he'd seen in the magazine, impressive as they were, had in no way captured the true spirit of these magnificent machines. They seemed almost to breathe with a life of their own.

Heinrich appeared, opening the limo door for Hamilton and drawing his attention away from the sleek pair of racers. The dogs were waiting. Achermann spoke, obviously pleased with the dread they inspired in his guest.

"You have met Loki and Fenris. These are Fafnir, Nidhoggr, and Jorm." Each of the dogs responded to the mention of its name with an eager glance at their master.

"Jorm?" Hamilton muttered, hardly realizing he'd spoken.

"Brief for 'Jormungandr,'" Achermann explained. "The names are all from the Norse Mythos. Jormungandr is the giant snake which encircles the base of the Tree of Life, and Nidhoggr, the great dragon who gnaws endlessly at its roots." He seemed to find considerable amusement in this, his wolfish grin widening as he prodded Hamilton from the safety of the limousine.

For the second time in fifteen minutes, Hamilton found himself surrounded by huge, suspicious dogs and struggled to contain his panic. He was certain they could smell his fear. Hell, he could smell it himself; pungent and unmistakable in the warm sunshine. The dogs prodded rudely at him and brushed their massive shoulders against his trembling knees, threatening to knock him off his feet altogether. He threw a desperate look at Achermann and saw the light of sadistic pleasure in his arctic eyes. The dogs began growling

as they buffeted him between their bodies, and he could actually feel the thunder of their voices as they pressed ever closer against his legs. He tried to protect himself with the briefcase, only to have it savagely nudged away by one of the snarling brutes. He was nearly weeping with terror when Achermann at last rapped out a series of commands.

"Runter! *Setz dich! Bleiben!*" Instantly, the animals stopped their ferocious snarling and snapped into sitting position. Hamilton was on the verge of collapse, his clothing soaked with sweat. He was also furiously angry, but dared not show it. Several tense moments passed before Achermann spoke.

"You need have no fear of these animals, Herr Hamilton," he said in conversational tones. "They are highly trained and perfectly obedient, as you can see."

Hamilton strove to master his voice. "To be truthful, Mr. Achermann, I came here to see these cars, not a demonstration of your dogs' proficiency at guarding them. It is unfair of you to take advantage of me this way." This was as firm a protest as he dared essay. Achermann was playing him as if he were a trout on light tackle, and with each passing moment, his situation seemed more hopeless.

Achermann regarded him with unconcealed amusement. "I apologize," he said, his voice utterly devoid of sincerity. "By all means, let us examine the cars."

Hamilton could feel the dogs' eyes on him as he followed Achermann past them into the bay. It was perfectly clear that this madman had no intention of accepting anything less than a quarter of a million dollars. Now. Here. Today. And no excuse Hamilton could come up with was going to be good enough—even though his life depended on it. Achermann was opening the door of one of the low-slung racers.

"You can see that they have been taken care of by expert mechanics. Factory trained. You will not find a wrench mark anywhere on them." He gestured. "Come. See for yourself. They are perfect."

They were indeed, as Hamilton had known they would be. There was no fault he could point to as an excuse for backing out. He cursed himself silently. Achermann was sliding behind the wheel, his eyes occupied with the controls. A rash impulse flared in Hamilton's mind, and he looked wildly about for a wrench or hammer. Instead, he found the dogs. They were watching his every move. He heard the high-pitched whine of the starter and the Porsche snarled to life, its unmuffled engine deafening in the confined space of the

metal-walled bay. Achermann nodded toward the door and eased the clutch in, rolling the glossy black machine smoothly out onto the apron. Hamilton followed, making a wide circle around the dogs. What else could he do?

Outside, the pulsing thunder of the two-liter engine was more bearable, but still not far below the threshold of real pain. Achermann gestured him into the passenger seat. He hesitated. Was this to be another exercise in intimidation? Probably. He came to a decision.

"Go ahead," he shouted above the throbbing engine. "I'll watch." Perhaps while Achermann was roaring around the track he could persuade the chauffeur to get him out of this predicament. Doubtful, to say the least, but anything was worth a try. There was sudden silence as Achermann killed the engine. Hamilton, surprised in the midst of his thoughts, experienced a guilty twinge as he met Achermann's eyes.

"You do not want a test ride?" Achermann demanded. His disappointment was obvious. And dangerous. "Or," he sneered, "did you want to drive a few laps yourself?" It was clear he deemed Hamilton incompetent to operate such a vehicle. And very likely he was correct. But . . .

"In fact, yes," Hamilton said, jumping at the only chance he could see to escape. "I'd prefer to drive it myself." There. He'd managed to say it before he could change his mind. What the hell? His survival was at stake, as Achermann had rather heavily-handedly pointed out. Besides, he reminded himself, Achermann believed the briefcase held \$250,000. That was his hole card.

Achermann extricated himself from the car with considerable difficulty. The doorsill was only inches from the ground, and his stiff leg was a hindrance, as Hamilton noted with some satisfaction. Finally he was on his feet, scowling and muttering unintelligibly. Hamilton slid into the seat, placing the briefcase on the seat next to him. He found the ignition switch, and, just remembering to depress the clutch pedal, fired the engine. As he buckled into the seat harness, Achermann reached past him and grabbed the briefcase. "I'll just take care of this for you," he shouted over the din of 180 horsepower. He waved Hamilton toward the track, his face a portrait of sardonic triumph.

Hamilton slipped the clutch and tried gently to boost the RPM's enough to overcome inertia without stalling, but the accelerator pedal was amazingly touchy and he redlined the tachometer. The

tires howled as they broke traction, and the car fishtailed sickeningly down the ramp toward the track. He had one lap in which to learn the intricacies of this high-powered monster. After one circuit, he'd whip off the track and head for the gate. He bitterly regretted the loss of his briefcase; it would surely cost him his job. But this was his only chance. He'd need incredible luck just to get away with his life.

He shifted gears, grinding and shuddering as he swept into the first turn, and fought to concentrate on the controls. How many times had he dreamed of being behind the wheel of a race car? Well, dammit, here he was. And it was only a car after all . . .

He overcorrected as he came into the straightaway and jagged back and forth across the entire width of the track before he regained control. God, this thing was touchy! He stabbed his left foot at the clutch to shift higher and hit the brake pedal instead just as he was entering the second turn. The car slammed into a four-wheel drift, and in desperation, Hamilton released the steering wheel, lifting his foot from the accelerator and noticing the speedometer for the first time. A giant fist clamped his heart as he saw that he was doing 130. As the car miraculously recovered, he realized that the indicated speed was in kilometers, which converted to a mere eighty miles per hour. He fought his way through the remainder of the curve, accelerating again on the straightaway, and there ahead was the ramp leading back to the estate road. He gripped the wheel and centered the ramp between the sleek curves of the wheel wells. This would have to be it.

Hamilton roared down the straightaway and up the sloping ramp to the apron. Achermann, the dogs, and the limousine blurred past on his right as he accelerated onto the estate road and headed back the way they'd come. He had no time for a look in the rearview mirror, all his attention being required to keep this fretful little overpowered skateboard on the road. As he wheeled through the numerous turnings of the road, he began to feel a little glow of pride suffusing the stark fear which had been gripping his guts for what seemed an eternity. But he dared not spare the attention to enjoy it. The driveway to the manor house flashed past on his left, and the next moment he was belting along beside the lake, the speedo reading 190. He remembered there was a tunnel up ahead somewhere and judiciously throttled back, finally able to spare a glance at the rearview mirror. No pursuit was in sight, thank God. His mind leaped ahead. How was he going to get past the gate? Well,

he thought, grinning slightly, he'd burn *that* bridge when he came to it.

Ahead yawned the tunnel, the rock walls flanking its mouth looking remarkably hard and unforgiving. He downshifted and took a deep breath. The next instant he was in total darkness, the thunderous growl of the engine blatting off the surrounding stone walls and hammering his eardrums. The steering wheel felt like a slender bar of soap in his sweaty hands. He heard himself moan softly, and then there was light ahead. Another second, and he flashed into sunshine, fighting to hold the car steady through a long, sweeping right-hand curve. The gate was not far off now.

He began to slow the car, seeming to have outrun his panic for the time being. Shifting down through the gears, he pondered the problem of the gate. He assumed it was operated in the same way as the garage doors. Perhaps there was a transmitter in this car. Not likely, but he began looking anyway. The roadway flared, and the gate was before him, looking very substantial in the gray stone wall. He took a second look. By God! It was swinging open! His mind reeled. Could there be an electric eye along the approach? Well, it didn't matter, he was free now! Through the gate and onto the road he sped, directly into the massive stainless-steel radiator of the Rolls-Royce which was just turning to enter the gate.

There was a thundering crash as the two vehicles ground together, broken glass scattering like diamonds across the roadway. The nose of the fiberglass-bodied 904 buckled for a millisecond, then shattered blindingly, the suspension members and steering gear contorting and snapping under stress they'd never been intended to take. The box-beam longitudinal frame members dove under the front axle of the Rolls, sparks showering in every direction. In less than a second both vehicles were at rest, the tortured remains of the Porsche beneath the front axle of the big Rolls. A jet of blistering steam from the ruptured radiator of the larger car seared Hamilton's neck, and he struggled desperately to free himself from the wreckage. He heard voices.

"What in the hell is my 904 doing out here?" an obviously enraged woman was demanding.

"I'm sure I don't know, Sabeth," a man's voice replied. "Did you recognize the driver?"

"It's no one I've ever seen. Get him out of there. If he's still alive, I want some answers!"

Hamilton was still alive all right, and beginning to wish he wasn't.

A man's face came into view as the hood of the Rolls was raised. "Are you all right?"

"I don't know," was all he could say. It happened to be the truth.

"D'you mind telling us what you're doing in this car? On this property?"

"Trying to get away from that madman," he groaned. "Please, get me out of here."

"Of course," the man assured him. "What's this about a madman?"

"Achermann! The owner."

The stranger's face showed amazement. "Achermann? Owner? What in hell do you mean? My wife owns this car!"

The woman's voice rose above this last.

"David, what does he mean? Is he deranged?"

Hamilton was beginning to think this might well be the case. Nothing was making any sense. He hated himself for asking, but he had to know. "Who is Achermann, then?"

"Achermann! Why, he's our kennel keeper. What of it?"

Hamilton began to giggle. At first softly, then louder, and louder, until he was laughing uncontrollably, tears tracking down his cheeks and mixing with blood. And after a time, his thoughts turned to Joyce.



The Final Paragraph

MURDER ON THE INTERNET

by Henry Slesar

“You know what I think it is?” Jerry said to the burly detective. “Two hundred thousand cries for help. That’s what Flench was trying to send.”

The detective turned away from the computer screen, one of a half-dozen work stations lined up like tombstones in the brightly lit office. The analogy was apt, since the body of Ralph Flench had just been removed from the room.

“These things are hooked up to *two hundred* thousand others?”

“It’s called the internet,” Jerry said. He was in his element. Jerry was only a rookie, but his reputation as a computer hacker had put him in tandem with the top homicide cop on the force.

Joe Bliss knew he was a computer illiterate, but at his age he didn’t feel obliged to learn new tricks. He was only half listening when Jerry told him about the internet, describing all the on-line services and all the bulletin board members gleefully tapping messages to each other across something Jerry called cyberspace. All Bliss wanted to know was: which one of Flench’s subordinates slipped rat poison into his office-party cocktail?

Apparently, Flench had been a frustrated military man. The six people in his command became his personal regiment. He marched between their desks like an Inspector General, looking for the slightest breach of discipline. In the past year, he had discharged two employees, one for playing a game of Crystal Quest, the other for exchanging e-mail banter with a young woman.

Bliss couldn’t decide which of the six hated Flench the most.

Bill Milton and Ann Green didn't conceal their feelings. Frank Ryan's eyes blazed with hatred. Jack Marvin had smiled throughout the interrogation, Jane Denning made unlady-like remarks about the dead man. Bill Leeds suggested another party, to celebrate.

There weren't many signs of the fatal Christmas party: an artificial tree, a wreath, a few plastic cups, one of which was Exhibit A in the police laboratory. It had yielded no fingerprints; only traces of the poison that had ended Ralph Flench's life.

"Somebody handed it to him," Bliss said. "He must have known his killer. But he didn't know it was his murderer until the party was over and he was alone..."

"Then the pains started," Jerry said. "He must have been too weak to call anybody, so he did the next best thing—sent a message out to the internet!"

Bliss grunted. "That's why I brought you in, kid, so you could figure out what he was trying to send. What is it, anyway? Some kind of computer code?"

Jerry looked at the screen and read the symbols again.

"Y300 JQ4F8H 5468HT 59 I800 J3."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "There isn't any special code. There are coded instructions, but this is just garbage. 'Garbage in, garbage out.' That's what we always say...Ever think of taking lessons, Detective?"

He grinned smugly and Bliss, annoyed, started out of the room. But in the doorway, he stopped suddenly and clumped back to the computer desk. He sat down and said:

"I think I'll give you a lesson, wise guy. In how to catch a killer.



How did Bliss find the
key to the solution?

"The poor guy couldn't see straight," Bliss said. "So he never noticed that he had his fingers on the wrong row of the keyboard. See? When I type with my fingers on the third row, I get the 'garbage' on the screen. But when you look at the letters below the ones on the screen, you type: HELP MARVIN TRYING TO KILL ME."

a **NEW** short story by

MICHAEL Z. LEWIN

When it comes to lively dialogue, Michael Z. Lewin is one of the best in the crime field. Not surprising when you learn that he has devoted a good part of his career to writing radio plays for the BBC. The following story could almost be a radio play, consisting as it does almost entirely of an exchange between two young people on a train . . .

THE HIT

by **MICHAEL Z. LEWIN**

The man walked slowly along the aisle and then stopped. "Excuse me," he said.

The woman looked up from her book. "Yes?"

"Is this seat taken?" He pointed to one of two empty across the table she was resting her elbows on.

"No," she said, without betraying her annoyance. The carriage was by no means full. Elsewhere there were empty pairs of seats, even another table. Oh well, it happens. She could always move to another seat herself. Unfair. A pain. A fact of life.

The woman picked her book up.

Inevitably the man spoke again. "Are you enjoying it?" The woman said nothing. The man, however, persisted. "The book. Is it good?"

"Fine," the woman said without raising her eyes.

The man said, "It's just that I have been waiting my whole career for this moment."

Still not raising her eyes, and despite her expectations, the woman felt a flicker of curiosity as she digested what he had said. She said,

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"Oh yes?" in a way that could equally be the prelude for a go-away-and-leave-me-alone outburst.

"My whole career," the man repeated easily. "It's been sort of a dream. A career target. And now it's happened."

The woman put her book down. "What *are* you talking about?" she said.

"I wrote what you are reading," the man said.

"You . . ." She looked at the cover of the book.

With a modest laugh, the man said, "I am Clive Kessler. I've always hoped that one day I would see someone reading one of my books on the train and now it's happened. I suppose it's a rite-of-passage event for a writer. A coming of age." He grinned good-naturedly.

The woman smiled. "You're Clive Kessler?" she asked, and once the question was out, she felt stupid to have asked it.

Kessler reached across the table, asking to shake hands. In a mock-American voice he said, "And you are my one millionth customer, so you win the grand prize."

The woman shook hands. "What prize?"

"A cuppa coffee and a Briddish Rail donut. D'ya take sugar?"

"Yes," the woman said.

"I'll be right back," the man said.

By the time Kessler returned with two coffees and two jam donuts the woman had read what little there was about the author on the cover of her paperback thriller.

"I didn't know how much sugar to bring," he said. "If one of these mingy little packets isn't enough you can always scrape some off a donut. Here, use mine." He began to scrape sugar onto a serviette.

"No no," she laughed. "This is plenty."

"If you're sure," he said. "As my one millionth customer, I want to see you're treated right."

"I must say," she said, "you're younger than I would have expected, for having written eight novels."

"And you're younger than I expected my millionth reader to be," Kessler said quickly. "No, in fact I am older than I look."

"Are you?"

"Thirty-four. Do I look thirty-four?"

She shook her head. Although his hair was beginning to recede, she would have guessed late twenties. Not an unpleasant-looking man, and when he joked his face lit up.

"And you're what? About forty-five?"

"Thank you *very* much."

"Fifty? Fifty-five? It's just that my publisher tells me I particularly appeal to the older reader."

"Really?" she asked.

"So I was told."

"I'm surprised."

"I will fax my publisher immediately and have my image corrected," he said. "Conductor? Conductor? I want to send a fax. Where is the conductor? They're never around when you need one. So, how old are you? It's not that I would ask on my own account, but if I am to prove my point with the publisher . . ."

"Twenty," she said.

"Twenty," he repeated. "And lovely with it. And did your parents give you a name, or do they just call you what mine used to call me. 'Oy, you. Come here. Clean this mess. No, I don't believe your brother did it.' I was fifteen before I realised that my name wasn't 'Oy, you.'"

"Really?" she asked.

"All those years thinking I was Japanese. Sounds Japanese, doesn't it? 'Oy, you.' People teasing me because I lost the war. I never understood."

"You're joking, aren't you?" she said.

"Let's just say that I lead a rich fantasy life. But of course I have to, don't I?"

"Where do your ideas come from, then?"

"From the very air we breathe. They're all around us."

"No, really."

"Really? Well, as you're a prize-winning reader, I'll tell you. They come from paying attention to what I see and what I read and what happens to me. And then I try to think of different ways it might have happened."

"Different ways?"

"If I do it the same way everybody else does it, then there's no point, is there? If I write the three little pigs, who cares? But if I write a story called the three little wolves, then I'm on my way. See?"

"I think so," she said.

"So," Kessler said. "Do you have a name?"

"Catherine. But people call me Cat."

"So, Cat, are you married? Do you have children?"

"Give us a chance!" she said.

"I keep forgetting. You're not one of my typical readers. You're my one millionth reader."

"Am I? Really?"

"I hereby pronounce you Clive Kessler's official one millionth reader. If you accept this official position, you must shake my hand again."

They shook hands again but this time the man did not release the woman immediately. "You have nice hands," he said quietly. "But I expect everybody tells you that." He released her.

She said, "No, they don't."

"Well, they should. Because you do. And that's official, too. But to make your hands official we must shake books on it." He picked up her book. Instinctively she grabbed it, too. He shook the book up and down. "There," he said, "we've shaken books on it, so it's settled."

"You're weird," she said.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"You didn't upset me," she said.

"I was just a bit lonely. I saw you reading the book. And, well, the rest is history."

"Lonely?" she said.

"A writer's life is a lonely one," he said. "You have to do it by yourself."

"Oh, I see."

"And you never meet any of the people you do it for," he said. "They may buy the book, and eventually the publisher tells you how many you've sold. But normally you never meet anybody who ever reads them. The people who, after all, are the people you wrote the book for."

"I never thought of that," she said.

"Did you ever meet a writer before?"

"Only in school. They had a poet come in. It was in primary school and most of the kids thought her jokes were pretty naff. I kind of liked her, though."

"And so you continue to read. And here you are, on the train today, reading one of mine. So, where are you going?"

"To Reading. I'm visiting my dad's mum."

"Do you like her?"

"Not much."

"So, it's a duty visit?"

"Yeah. I go about every couple of months."

"You're a very good granddaughter, Cat."

She laughed. "Dad gives me a tenner and pays the train fare."

"And you make an old woman happy."

"She doesn't usually know who I am, to tell the truth. But it's a day out."

"I'm going to Reading, too," the man said.

"What for?"

"Research."

"Oh."

"For my next book. I'm going to have a look at Reading Gaol."

"The gaol. What for?"

"Because famous people have been incarcerated there. Oscar Wilde, for instance."

"Yeah?"

"And Stacy Keach. He's an American actor. Played Mike Hammer on the tele."

"What was he in gaol for?"

"Drugs."

"Oh."

"He's out now, though."

"Who's Mike Hammer?"

"Mickey Spillane's psychotic, misogynistic private eye."

"Oh."

"Not your thing, private eyes?"

"They're okay, but I like books with more romance in them better."

"And sex?"

She smiled. "Don't mind."

"Like my books?"

She hesitated.

"You haven't got to the sexy bits then?" He nodded at the open book on the table between them.

"What sexy bits?" she asked.

"I don't want to spoil them by telling you," he said easily. "Surprise, unexpectedness . . . They make sex so much more exciting, don't you think?"

She frowned at him across the table.

"I'm sorry if I've upset you by referring to sex," he said gently. "You said you didn't mind. I didn't mean to offend you. All I mean to do is chat." He raised one of his hands and counted off on his

fingers. "One, chat. Two, see Reading Gaol. Three, invite you for a meal after you see your gran. Four, walk around the park. *Then*, if we get to the thumb, then maybe we can talk about sex before the last train home. Something like that."

The man spoke lightly, playfully. But the woman's mood had become hard. He saw it, recognised it, and said, "What's wrong, Cat?" She picked the book up. "I've read this book before."

"A real fan. That's great. Do you want me to sign it?"

She pulled the book to her chest. "There are no sexy bits in it."

"There aren't?"

"None."

"It's hard to believe that someone can write a book, can spend all the time and energy it takes to convert blank sheets of paper into something interesting, and then not remember what he's written."

"Yes. It is hard to believe."

"It happens, though."

"So tell me the story of the book."

"The story?"

"What is it about?"

"You can write a book," the man said, "and then once you start on another you can't remember a single thing about the first. Not a single thing."

The woman was not impressed with this insight about writers. She and the man looked at one another for a number of seconds.

Then the man said, "*I am* a writer."

"Congratulations."

"My name is John Leith. I'm twenty-seven years old. I've written three novels, and finally one of them got published last summer. Actually published. That's quite a big deal these days. It was called *Winter Rain*. It came out in June. It went back in again in July. I've written another novel since then, but the publishers don't even want to read it. I have always wanted to be a writer, since I was about twelve. I have always wanted to be on a train or a plane and see a beautiful woman reading one of my books. I've wanted to know what it would be like to introduce myself and to see what she felt about what she was reading. Because when I write, the way I do it is by writing as if it's a letter to a woman I love, by writing as if I am making love to her."

So you lie to the women you make love to, the woman thought. She said, "And so you made all that stuff up."

"Yes. To find out what it would feel like. To see if it was worth my continuing to write. To see if it was worth keeping on trying."

"And is it?"

"It was very nice while we were talking, while we were getting along. Extremely nice. I liked it."

"Even though you were lying through your teeth."

"You wouldn't have talked to me otherwise, would you?"

"No."

"I have no regrets," he said.

"How did you know there was nothing in the book about the real Clive Kessler?"

"I study the book racks in railroad stations. I make a list of books with no picture of the author and nothing saying he's sixty-five, gay, and a leper."

"You make a list?"

"I'm a very organised person."

"Did you really write a book called *Winter* . . . whatever it was?"

"*Winter Rain*."

"Yeah."

"No," he said. "I've never written a book. But I'm only twenty-four. I have time."

"Never written a book," she said, "but you have picked up girls this way before."

"Yes," he said.

"Really?"

"No," he said. "In fact, this is the first time I've tried it. I was in Taunton station and I saw you buy a copy and so I looked at another copy and there was nothing about the author, and then I saw you sitting alone." His voice trailed away.

She smiled and raised one eyebrow as she watched him think.

"You said you'd read it before."

"Yes."

"But you bought a new copy."

"I read a library copy," she said, "but I wanted one of my own."

"Oh," he said.

"Or I read a mate's copy, and wanted one of my own. Or I lost my first copy. Or I just wanted two."

He stared at her.

"No more questions? I thought authors were always full of questions."

"Have you read it before?"

"Of course not." She laughed.

"Oh," he said.

"And I don't have a grandmother."

"You don't?"

"I am going to Reading to meet my boyfriend."

"You are?"

"To tell you the absolute truth," she said, "he and I are going to sort out how we can get rid of his wife."

"I don't believe you," the man said. "You're just getting back at me."

"It is the truth," the woman said. "And it's such an exquisite relief to be able to tell someone, someone who can't possibly hurt me."

"I can't?"

"For one thing, you're a complete stranger. For another, you're a liar and a fantasist. Nobody would ever believe you. I feel really good for having said it out loud now. Not that I am getting cold feet. I'm not. My boyfriend—well, he's a little old to be called that—but he's exactly what I have always wanted in a man. He's mature. He's exciting. And he is extremely rich, or at least he will be if his wife dies by accident. My only worry is that he'll chicken out, so chances are I'll have to do it myself. I won't mind that. She's a bitch and a ball-breaker. She deserves to die. I figure I'll run her over. She jogs, so it shouldn't be hard. God, I hate joggers. Don't you?"

"You're making all this up," he said.

Her look at him was the coldest he'd ever seen. "Yeah," she said. "Making it all up. Just don't read the papers for the next few days."

"That's awful," he said.

"That's what I hate about men," she said. "Under the bluster they're so soft. You only go round once in this life, right? Well, this is my chance to get the gold ring."

The man sat staring at her, silenced.

The woman said, "Hey, talking about finally being rid of *her* is making me prickly. You fancy a quickie? We could do it in the toilet at the end of the carriage. You're not HIV positive, are you?"

"No," he said.

"I didn't think so. I can usually tell by looking."

The man said, "Come on, it's a joke, right?"

"You go first. I'll knock twice when I want to come in."

The man rose unsteadily. He left the carriage without looking behind him.

At his fleeing back the woman made a heartfelt V sign. She finished her coffee. She picked up her book. ●

a **NEW** short story by

SEYMOUR SHUBIN

Seymour Shubin has made his mark on mystery fiction by combining suspense with a profound interest in social and psychological issues. Like his bestselling first novel, a powerful book against capital punishment, most of his recent books have received international attention. . . .

PERFECT IN EVERY WAY

by **SEYMOUR SHUBIN**

I don't know why I had this feeling they would be the ones to buy our house. They were a young couple, in their late twenties, just about the age Melissa and I were when we'd bought it forty-two years ago, only then, the first time we walked in, we had Becky with us, each of us taking turns holding her hand so she wouldn't run around the house. But it wasn't just their age that made me feel it, for there had been other couples of about that age; it was the way the wife stood there, just off the foyer in the living room, and looked around with a little smile and a certain look that seemed to say yes, this could be it, let it stay being it as we walk on through it. But even more it was the husband's look—the look that came after he'd taken those first glances at the living room, the ceiling, the walls, everything; the way he turned to her that seemed to say without words, this is what you want, isn't it?

Melissa spoke to them first, hand extended. "Hello, I'm Mrs. Phillips, this is my husband," and my hand went out to first one and then the other. "Please," she said, "feel free," which would imply, wouldn't it, that they could go through the house on their own? Something I mention only because Melissa drifted along with them, and I drifted along too, in back.

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Once, Melissa glanced at me with a touch of a smile. It said: See? And it said, too: I'll just bet you they will.

You see, she had insisted we do it without a real-estate agent so we wouldn't have to pay a commission. I'd pleaded with her no—all I wanted was to sell it, get out of there. Forty-two years in one house—enough, enough! And so every day for the past four weeks, especially those long, long Sundays, we'd been sitting and waiting, leaping up but trying not to seem overanxious whenever someone showed up. And just today, for maybe the fiftieth time, I had pleaded, "Let's get an agent, I'm sick of this."

And now there was her smile.

The woman, who'd introduced herself as Mrs. Williams, said, "This has how many bedrooms?"

Melissa beat me to it. "Four."

"And bathrooms?"

I took over, fast. "Four. A powder room down here, two upstairs and one in the basement."

Really a perfect large-small house, I told them. The woman smiled at the term and I went on to explain that it was a small house, basically, in the sense that it wasn't overwhelming to maintain, far from it, but large in the sense that in addition to the four bedrooms it had a den which they hadn't seen, and there was a finished basement and an attached two-car garage, and, oh yes, a nicely insulated attic.

"What are the taxes?" he asked.

When I told him, his face expressed delight and astonishment. They *were* low. The school taxes, too, and sewer and water.

"It's really been a perfect house for us," I said. "Perfect."

Maybe you didn't notice, I continued, but it's all stone, solid stone. And the place didn't take much to heat because of the insulation and the way it stood in relation to the sun. The roof—we'd just put on a new one, just as the owner before us had done. No termites, a perfectly dry basement, central air. And there was a garden that was small enough to take care of by yourself, but large enough so that it wouldn't be embarrassing to call in a gardener. And the trees—had they seen that fir in front, and the cherry to one side? In back of the house there was a large apple and several oaks, and it had loads of forsythia and hyacinth—you'll see for yourself.

Melissa said, "Do you have children?"

They had one, Mrs. Williams said, then added with a smile that they'd just learned that another was on the way. Which, Melissa

quickly replied, her hand instinctively going out to her, was exactly what we'd had—Becky had been three when we moved in and Katie was born eight months later.

"Where do your children live now?" Mrs. Williams asked.

When Melissa told her that Becky and her husband and two children lived right in the next township, and Katie and her brood were just about a thirty-minute ride away, Mrs. Williams turned to her husband and with a slight intake of breath said, "Wouldn't Mother and Daddy just love that?" None of her brothers and sisters, she explained to us, lived within five hundred miles of her parents, and one even lived in Australia. "My parents say it all the time, if only one of you lived close. And they say it's true of all their friends—every one of their children lives far away. You're very fortunate."

"And we know it," Melissa said with a wise nod. "But you have to be very careful you don't intrude on their lives."

"I would say, hearing that, they don't have that problem."

We walked on through the first floor, Melissa and I taking turns—but almost always in response to their questions—to give other of the house's attributes. Schools—absolutely great schools—"One of the big reasons I wanted to live in the township was the schools," Melissa said. "And they've kept up. You can talk to anyone around here with children."

Mrs. Williams nodded at that, for apparently she'd heard too.

"And the children," Melissa went on, "are in walking distance—what could be nicer than that? And I mean to all the schools, not just grammar, but the middle school, the high school."

"Now, that's *nice*," Mrs. Williams said with a look at her husband.

What's also nice, I said as we neared the kitchen, is that though you have all the advantages of a suburb, you can walk to the train to the city. And, oh yes, there's a playground a few blocks away, and a pond where the kids go ice skating. And the police are very, very nice; and you may have passed it, there's a fire station only about four blocks down the street.

Walking into the kitchen, Mrs. Williams stopped all at once and looked around and that smile of hers broadened. "Oh, I always wanted a kitchen like this. George, look," and she pointed at almost everything—the copper pots that overhung the island, the large shiny stove, the refrigerator that released a crackle of ice with a touch, the round breakfast table near the windows overlooking the back garden. And in the midst of this, while nodding and agreeing with her how perfect it was, somewhere Mr. Williams found time

to look at me and to say, almost apologetically, "This would be our first house."

He'd caught me off guard, for during the past few moments, while my face might have been all light and air, I'd been thinking the darkest thoughts, the thing I'd been thinking about for so long—how this house had become a trap for me, how I had to get out, didn't know what I'd do if I had to stay any longer.

Had said it to Melissa that day, maybe for the millionth time. Who'd given me the look of disdain it always produced.

"I'm sorry," I said to him, "what did you say?"

"This would be our first home."

"It was ours, too." And with this it began to come back—though of late it seemed always at the edge of my consciousness—the little apartment we'd had over a real-estate office in center city. It was an apartment you had to walk up a long flight of narrow, wooden stairs to get to, and where each room was on a separate level. It was so cozy, just right for us, especially in winter when you'd see cars stalled and skidding around in the snow, and we'd feel so good and secure, putting on our boots to go out to eat or to a movie, while the rest of the world struggled with cars and distances. Even my office—a little one-man, storefront ad agency I'd started—was just around the corner.

There was such a sense of freedom living there.

I said to Mr. Williams, "Where do you live now?"

"A little apartment, but it won't be enough for our needs now." Still, did I detect a touch of sadness there?

"That was our problem," Melissa said. "We had an adorable apartment."

"I really didn't want to leave," I said. "It was like . . . something in Greenwich Village, I guess. But it didn't serve our purpose anymore. And this place had everything. Has everything."

I'd talked about moving for years, though this was the first time Melissa'd agreed to put the house up for sale. I'd come close to this point several times, but there was always something, some goddam something that stopped me. Where could you find a house this inexpensive? Where a more temperate climate, where cleaner air, nicer neighbors? Where would you find doctors as caring and tuned in to us as ours? And our medical records, our *records*! And the girls and the grandchildren, and two sons-in-law you could really *talk* to and call on for advice. And work—I was retired, but still did consulting,

and though I didn't really need to do it, you never knew, you never knew. And all my clients were in this area.

"This," Melissa was saying, "was our Becky's room."

"Oh, you kept it just like it was," Mrs. Williams said admiringly, looking at Melissa for confirmation.

"Yes," Melissa said.

Mrs. Williams was referring to the cork paneling on the wall next to the bed, with old pictures and newspaper clips thumbtacked to it—Becky had been quite an athlete. And now in Katie's room, there were three of her old teddy bears she deliberately kept here for *her* children when they visited, and the bunny-rabbit table lamp and the table-hockey game, with the few broken men, she always said she was going to take home.

All part of the trap, too, in a way. You know, don't you, that memories can be a trap?

How I'd come to hate this house; oh, how I hated it! I'd loved it once, I did, but it had gone a million miles past serving its purpose!

My heart was going fast now, with anxiety. Let me be right about these people, I was thinking, let them—

"You know, George," Mrs. Williams said, "I think this would be perfect for Gail's room, and the other would be perfect for the baby. Don't you think?"

"Yes." He nodded quickly.

"Let me show you our room," Melissa said, but she lingered behind for a few moments, gazing into Katie's old room as though hating to release it.

Although a stranger wouldn't ever detect it from her manner, she still didn't want to move. I was sure. I *knew* her, she hadn't changed. And it was probably even one of the reasons she didn't want an agent, was hoping we couldn't do it.

"Yes, this is a nice large bedroom," Mrs. Williams said.

"Feel free to open the closets," Melissa offered.

"Hmm," Mrs. Williams said, pleased, at each open door.

In my study, Mr. Williams said, "Are you retired? I've the feeling you might be."

"I am. But I still keep my hand in."

"That's always a good idea, I would think. What," he soon asked his wife, "will we do with this room?" and there was such a tone of worry in his voice that I suddenly visualized it all ending here. Here!

I said quickly. "You can turn it back into a bedroom. That's what it was."

"Of course, George," his wife said. "It'll be an extra bedroom."

"I mean all those bookcases," he said. Then to me: "You must have two hundred books in this room alone. Do you have any idea how many you have altogether?"

"Quite a few," I said.

"It's really a shame, though," Mrs. Williams said, "to tear down these beautiful bookcases." Then she said, "Will you have room for them where you're moving?"

"No," Melissa replied. "We'll have to store them or sell them or give them away."

Smiling, Mrs. Williams looked at me. "May I ask where you're moving to?"

"I think," I said, "we're going to start off in Spain."

"What do you mean," Mr. Williams asked, "by 'you think'?"

"Oh," Melissa spoke up, "we're going to put everything in storage, or just about everything, and just take off. Go with the wind pretty much. Bill has always wanted this," she said, smiling at me, "and we decided it's time. Just take off. We have a bunch of brochures. Six months in Spain—travel all around there first, we've never been there, we've never been to *most* places—and see where we'd like to put down roots for, say, six months before moving on. I was thinking maybe Valencia first, I've heard such nice things—you know, on the Mediterranean?"

"You mean," Mr. Williams said, "you're not sure where you'll be living? You'll just be . . . going?"

"Oh, that's the idea," Melissa said. "Then we'll go to Portugal, although we still might go to Portugal first. We're like two kids."

"So you have no idea where you'll be settling down."

"Oh, that's the last thing we want to do," she said. "We've had enough of settling down. We're going to rent here, there, everywhere the wind and our whims take us. That sounds, oh . . . I guess poetic, but that's what we're going to do."

"Sounds like a dream," Mr. Williams said with a slight, awed shake of his head.

"The idea," Melissa said, "is to get away from everything you always assume you *have* to do, have to *have*. Live at last for ourselves. No more gardener just because next door has one. No more must have a new car every two years because you don't want to have the oldest one on the block. No living in fear, like—I can't do this, I can't do that because I might break a hip and what'll I do, who will I call, who'll care?" I'm *sick* of fear. Children, grand-

children—God bless them, but we'll see them once a year, twice a year. They'll do fine. I don't have to spend the rest of my life worrying about will they cross the street safely, will they do this, that, as though living *near* them is some kind of safety. And this may make me sound hard, but let them worry about *us* for a change."

"That's something," Mr. Williams said; and meanwhile I was staring over at Melissa in fury, for she was really taking years of my words and throwing them back at me, even embellishing them. And it was everything she'd ridiculed before!

You know, Mr. Williams's voice cut in, what *his* dream was?

"I'd really like to live somewhere where it's always sunny. The beach and shorts and barefoot thing. Really. Well, maybe someday."

"Honey, someday we will," his wife said. "You know we've talked."

"What she's talking about," Mr. Williams explained to us, "is what I *really* want some day. Well, some year. A charter fishing boat." His face was suddenly red, as though he was embarrassed. "You know, move with the seasons to the warm spots."

It was so idealistic a dream, so *corny* even, so much a cliché, that I couldn't believe he had let himself say the words. But almost instantly something strange happened in me. I didn't know this guy, what he did for a living—though I pictured him in some corporate, somewhat above entry-level job, but he seemed so simpleminded that I felt a rush of warmth toward him, a kind of . . . love. Like suddenly he was a son I wanted to protect. And what happened next, though it might not seem much, only brought it to a boil.

"We'll get it one day," Mrs. Williams said. Then, almost immediately putting an arm through his, "Honey, look at those windows. Do you know what curtains I can see going there?"

We were walking back downstairs soon. I know we went down to the finished basement, then out to the garage; I remember hearing Mrs. Williams admiring how neatly I kept my tools, but that's about all—my head and heart were pounding. And it was, I think, just when we came back into the living room that Mrs. Williams said, "When could we have possession?"

"Would two months be all right?" Melissa asked.

"Oh fine, that's just right."

"Well, the one vital thing we haven't asked about," Mr. Williams said, "is price. What are you asking?"

He had turned that simple-minded face to me and was looking at me with a mixture of eagerness and concern. But I'm just guessing

at that—the thing was, I could barely see him. There were waves in front of my eyes, sent up by the tumult of my heart.

One-ninety at the most, I'd insisted to Melissa. If not, then the best offer . . .

"Three hundred thousand."

It just came out, just like that. And through those waves in my vision I saw Mrs. Williams's face fall, but his—am I guessing this? am I making this up?—seemed to lift. Then they both turned to Melissa as she exclaimed, "Bill!"

"What's the matter? It's what we said."

She looked at me squarely. Then, quietly, "Yes, I know."

"Well," Mr. Williams said after a slow look at his wife, "it's way too much for us. I should have asked right away. But it is quite a house."

They were mumbling thanks now, Mrs. Williams almost in tears, and I think I shook hands with them, but the next thing I really remember is standing facing the closed door as though in the silence of a bell jar. I remember a feeling of tremendous elation—more than that, the greatest possible pure joy. I'd saved him! And given it to that little bitch! Not forever, maybe, no one could save anyone forever, but it wouldn't be me who helped trap him!

I was waiting, my back turned to her, for Melissa to speak up, to taunt, to yell. But nothing. And gradually, aware of it as if for the first time, I felt myself sinking back into it, the trap, the large-toothed trap. Back into the hovering madness.

But this was just that couple! There'd be others!

"You're crazy," Melissa's voice said, very quietly. "You know you're crazy?"

I didn't turn around.

"What've I told you?" she went on. "You blame me, you blame everyone, you make"—her voice kept getting higher—"every kind of excuse—*every* kind—it's this, it's that, it's everything but yourself! Yourself!"

I leaned my forehead against the door.

"You are crazy." Her voice came closer. "You know that? You're crazy!"

I remember thinking: Don't say that anymore. Please? Please? and I whirled and strode past her without a look.

Now, maybe this is another excuse. But why did she have to follow me? And why did her presence behind me close every path but into the kitchen, with its drawers, its—that beautiful kitchen? ●

a **NEW** short story by

DONALD OLSON

To his considerable output as a short-story writer and contributor to nonfiction journals, Donald Olson has recently begun to add film scripts; his beautifully constructed short stories seem to beg for dramatic adaptation. EQMM has a handful of new Donald Olson stories to offer over the coming months . . .

I'LL NEVER LEAVE YOU

by DONALD OLSON

⁶⁶“I’ll never leave you,” he said, not menacingly, yet giving the impression of flexing even the muscles of his cavernous brown eyes, those eyes that had first attracted her, eyes with the depth and serenely deceptive tenderness of certain animals of the cat family. His name was Guy Subjack and he was the athletic director of Moon Brook Golf and Racquet Club where Irina had first met him.

From where they were parked Irina could see the rolling greens of the golf course and just beyond, across the highway, the equally lush expanse of Lakeview Cemetery.

“Guy, don’t talk nonsense,” she said, wondering why they must all behave so tiresomely when it was over.

“I love you,” he said.

“Darling, we had an affair, not a romance.”

“I’m only a dumb jock, tell me the difference.”

“Romance is what we’re all looking for, but we settle for affairs—after a certain age, when we realize the search is hopeless.”

This pricked his anger. “God, you make me sound like something you picked up at the market. Something fresh and appealing to the eye that didn’t quite suit your taste when you got it home.”

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"So some of us have fickle appetites, sorry." She didn't wish to be cruel, she wasn't trying to hurt him, but she'd had no idea he was going to prove so difficult. For two weeks she'd been trying gracefully to end the affair and his puppy-dog persistence had begun first to bore and then to alarm her. Calling her at home when she'd made it clear that was a no-no, and if not exactly stalking her, seeming always to be just around the corner from wherever she happened to be. Of course, she couldn't avoid him at the club, but she resented having to give up its social activities for fear he would make a scene in front of her husband.

"You made a mistake if you thought you could treat me like all the others," he said truculently. "Take my word for it, you can be hurt, too."

"Is that a threat, Guy?"

"Take it any way you like. You're not dumping me."

"You're young, Guy, but that's no excuse to act like a child. Face it. It's finished."

"There's only one way it'll be finished. If one of us ends up over there." He waved a hand toward the cemetery.

"That's not funny. In fact, this whole thing ceased to be amusing when you began taking it seriously. You can drop me at the club. I'm going home."

"Time to get hubby's din-din, is it?"

"Oh, you do remember I have a husband."

"I'm not the one who forgets it."

He let her out of the car at the club's backdoor, away from prying eyes. His hand closed around her wrist. "I meant what I said, Irina. Think about it."

She jerked her hand loose. "Don't ever call me again, Guy. Don't ever speak to me."

The detective's name was Armand Daversa. He was young, heavy-browed, bull-shouldered, with searching green eyes.

Dr. Russell handed him a cup of coffee. "My wife just woke up. She'll be down soon as she's dressed. I gave her a mild sedative last night so she's still a bit groggy. As I am, for that matter."

"Understandable, sir. Before your wife joins us perhaps we might run over what you told me last night. By the way, have you had a chance to determine if anything's missing?"

"Nothing, so far as I can tell."

"Odd."

"Decidedly." Darwin Russell's keenly intelligent features were set in an expression of anxious bewilderment. "As nothing was stolen and my wife was not sexually assaulted, it poses a quandary as to the intruder's motive. Maybe what he did to Irina was out of spite because he found nothing worth stealing. We don't keep valuables in the house."

"Not likely he'd have done what he did even *before* ransacking the house. And binding your wife and leaving her in the car with the engine running in a closed garage would be carrying spite a bit far."

"Then how in God's name do you explain such a gratuitous act of violence? Unless he was a maniac."

"Maniacs aren't usually so methodical. He could as easily have killed Mrs. Russell right here in the house. The only apparent reason for lugging her out to the car would have been to fake a suicide, which is ruled out by his having tied her to the wheel and gagged her."

Russell refilled the detective's coffee cup. "I'm not a religious man, but I can't help feeling some force of providence was responsible for my coming home from the seminar to pick up that file when I did. If I hadn't . . . dear God, I don't even want to think about it."

Daversa rose as Irina appeared at the door. Russell hastened to take her hand and lead her to the sofa. She was very pale, which in no way detracted from her beauty. Her cloud of dark chestnut hair was gathered loosely in a bun on her neck, her gold-flecked eyes deeply shadowed.

"You're sure you're up to this, darling?" Russell inquired anxiously, still holding her hand.

"Quite sure. Coffee, please, darling." But then she seemed reluctant to release his hand.

Daversa promised to make his visit as brief as possible. "We got most of what we need last night. I'm wondering if after a night's rest you might have remembered anything in clearer detail?"

Irina's hand trembled as she lifted the delicate china cup to her lips. "I'm sorry. It happened so fast. I sat down to watch television here on the sofa shortly after Darwin left for the seminar. It was a rather noisy sitcom. I didn't hear anyone break in the backdoor. He was just suddenly there, behind me, grabbing me. All I saw before I fainted was that frightful stocking mask over his face. He didn't say a word. When I came to I was in my car, unable to move. The engine was running. I knew I was going to die. There wasn't a

prayer Darwin would be home until late . . . much too late."

She put the cup down shakily and reached for her husband's hand. Tears came into her eyes. "When I heard a sound and turned my head to the window it was like—like seeing God's face." A trace of color stained her cheeks, as if she feared the detective might find her words foolishly extravagant.

"Afraid I can't live up to *that* image," Darwin chaffed her, "but I trust I won't be rebuked quite so often in future for my absentmindedness. If I hadn't forgotten that file . . ." He too looked on the point of breaking down.

A confusion of emotions had kept Irina awake a good part of the night, despite the sedative. She knew it was her duty to tell the police about Guy Subjack, blaming herself for not taking his threatening remarks seriously, but if she were to do that, Darwin would learn of her affair with Guy and that was the last thing she wanted to happen; following the exposure of an earlier affair, she had made a solemn vow to Darwin that it would never happen again.

Daversa was asking her if the keys were already in her car; she admitted she was usually careless about leaving them in the ignition when the garage was shut.

"We've no enemies," Darwin insisted. "It's utterly senseless, like something one sees on TV. Tell me frankly, Lieutenant, what are your chances of catching this guy?"

Daversa spread his hands. "Ask me again in a few days. I might be in a better position to give you an answer."

Later that afternoon, on the flagged terrace overlooking the garden, Irina lapsed into a long abstracted silence. Beside her, Darwin was trying to read, but as usual those particular sounds of summer to which his ears were so sensitively attuned kept distracting his attention. He found himself watching a dragonfly patrolling the edge of the lily pond, its five eyes scouting for food to satisfy its insatiable appetite; if food were not available it would be quite capable of devouring part of its own body. A keen amateur etymologist, Darwin was knowledgeable about insect lore.

Irina's own two eyes betrayed nothing but a hunger for something she was unable to define until presently, with a heavy sigh, she spoke her husband's name. "I'm so frightened."

"Don't be. It's over now. You must try to put it out of your mind."

"How can I? I feel as if I'll never enjoy another moment's peace of mind."

She felt sure that by now Guy Subjack must know his attempt to kill her had failed, but how could one predict what a person deranged by love or by hate might do? He must know there was no way the police could prove he'd attacked her even if she gave them his name, so it wasn't likely he'd panic and run away. Irina could not shake off the fear that he might try again. She remembered how his voice had rung with conviction when he'd said the only way they'd be finished was if one of them ended up in the cemetery.

"You know I'm here to protect you," Darwin said.

"Now, yes, but what about tomorrow and the day after? When I'm here alone."

He smiled and reached for her hand. "My dear, you're not going to be alone. I'm taking a couple of weeks off from the clinic. I wouldn't dream of leaving you alone right now."

She squeezed his hand. "Oh, darling, I wouldn't have blamed you, you know, if you'd simply left me there to die."

"Irina!"

"No, I mean it."

"How could you even think such a terrible thought?"

"Because I've been a rotten wife. Maybe it took a brush with death to make me realize how lucky I've been. And how unfairly I've treated you."

This outburst of remorse was entirely sincere. The experience had shaken her to the depths. That boredom and restlessness had driven her into a series of casual brief affairs she could understand, but that she could have been so blind to the possibly dangerous consequences of her folly made her wonder if she herself could be emotionally unstable to the point of madness.

"Nonsense," he said. "You've been a perfect wife."

There was no trace of satire in the remark, which made her feel even more guilty. "By taking you for granted? By deceiving you?"

"If that's true, I've only myself to blame."

"You're much too forbearing, you know that. To think if it weren't for you . . ."

He rebuked her with a smile. "I don't want your gratitude, foolish girl."

"I will try to be a better wife, I promise."

"Have I often complained?"

"No. Maybe that's been part of the problem."

"Then we shall both turn over new leaves." He looked again at the dragonfly, so beautiful and voracious. "Believe it or not, there is

a bright side to all this if it teaches us to value what we have."

Two days later the phone rang when Darwin was at work in his study.

"Irina? Are you alone?"

Guy's voice, which had once so excited her, produced only a thrill of horror. "You must be insane!" she cried. "If it weren't for my husband I would have told the police about you. And I will, I swear I will if you ever call me or try to come near me again."

Not waiting for his reply she quickly hung up the phone and hugged her trembling body.

A week later Daversa paid them a visit. Darwin greeted him at the door. Irina was working in the garden.

"I've put off contacting you, hoping I'd have something. Unfortunately, we've simply nothing at all to go on."

"Irina will be disappointed."

"How is she?"

Darwin pulled a long face. "I'm worried about her. I can't leave her alone, not even for an hour. She's in a constant state of nerves. The slightest noise alarms her. She jumps whenever the phone rings, and she can't sleep."

"It'll take time." Daversa hesitated. "Dr. Russell, as long as we're alone I feel obliged to ask a rather indelicate question. Has your wife given you any cause at all to suspect she might have held something back?"

Darwin looked at him with astonishment. "Good lord, what are you implying?"

"Sir, it clearly appears from all the evidence that someone came here with the deliberate intention of killing your wife. Someone, I'm assuming for argument's sake, who knew she would be alone. So the question remains: Why did he want to kill her? I must ask you this: Could there be someone in your wife's past who might bear a grudge against her? A murderous grudge?"

"Impossible. We've been married fifteen years."

"She's considerably younger than you, sir, and a beautiful woman."

"A disgruntled lover, is that what you're suggesting?"

"I take it you find the notion unlikely?"

"I find it preposterous."

The detective looked at him as if he thought the doctor's denial might be a bit too fervent for belief.

"I'm sorry, but you do realize we're fishing in the dark."
"A maniac, Lieutenant. It's the only possible explanation."

Daversa had no sooner left the house than Irina appeared in the doorway.

"Thank you, Darwin."

"You heard?"

"Why didn't you tell him about Alex?"

"My dear, that was two years ago. We agreed never to mention it again."

"I'm sorry, but I am grateful for your not telling Daversa about him. As if Alex could ever have done anything like that. The idea's ludicrous."

Darwin took her in his arms. "This can't go on, you know. Eventually I'm going to have to return to the clinic. You simply must try to put all this behind you."

"No! You can't leave me alone. Not yet."

"Irina, we must resume a normal life."

She tried to find the courage to tell him the truth, but could not; better to risk her life by remaining silent than the death of her marriage, the marriage that now meant everything to her, by speaking out. "You're right, I know, darling. Please, just be patient with me."

"My dear, haven't I always been?"

The days passed with no visible sign of improvement in Irina's mental state; a full-fledged anxiety neurosis threatened, with the usual physical manifestations: depression, chronic sleeplessness, and weight loss. Her eyes were shadowed and wore a constantly haunted look. At her insistence, she and Darwin were again occupying the same bedroom; even with the windows locked she could not bear sleeping alone. Their social life was nonexistent.

Darwin tried to reason with her. "You must begin seeing people. You can't live like this."

"I don't want *people*," she retorted bitterly. "I've had too many people. You're the only one I need. The only one I can trust and feel safe with. Promise you won't ever leave me."

"As if I ever would."

"God knows I gave you every reason to."

"Past history, my dear. I love you. I always have. Did you suppose I'd let Alex ruin our lives?"

"Before Alex there were others. You know that."

"But *after* Alex you gave me your word you would never be unfaithful again. That was enough for me."

Finally the day arrived when Darwin knew he must take a firm hand.

"I want you to depend on me, Irina, but your dependence is becoming almost pathological. You simply must pull yourself together."

She pleaded, implored, and finally raged, but he was resolved. He must return to work. When neither tears nor words would sway him, Irina insisted she could not stay in the house alone without protection.

"My dear, you're not suggesting I hire a bodyguard, surely."

"A gun. You must buy me a gun. I must be able to defend myself if anything like that happens again."

He could not discourage the idea, and so he bought her a gun and taught her how to use it, though with the gravest misgivings. He was troubled by disturbing visions of Irina mistaking some casual caller for an intruder and perhaps shooting an innocent man. Yet possession of the weapon did seem to produce a calming effect on her nerves. She was less easily agitated, and at night, with Darwin at one side and the gun in the bedside table at her other side, she was able to sleep again.

The news of Guy Subjack's death was as shattering to Irina as the car crash that had taken his life. That it might have been an accident the police, according to news reports, were unable to disprove, although there were no skid marks, the weather was clear, and there was evidence Subjack had been drinking heavily before leaving the club.

Only Irina knew the truth. A letter arrived at the house the morning after Guy's death.

My dearest Irina, I told you the only way it would ever be over between us was if one of us ended up in the cemetery. I don't want to go on living without you. Maybe this is the only way I can be sure you'll never forget me. Guy.

As Darwin had known Guy Subjack from the club, his failure to mention the man's death might have seemed peculiar to Irina had she been less overwhelmed by the most acute feelings of guilt. That Guy had been hinting at suicide rather than murder during that last meeting had never entered Irina's mind, and how could she not

have assumed he must have been her assailant when the attack followed so closely upon that final meeting? Now she was left with the conviction that Darwin had been right, the intruder could only have been some demented stranger.

But it was the conviction that Guy had loved her, loved her as perhaps no other man but Darwin ever had, that excited the most excruciating sense of guilt. The knowledge that she was responsible for the death of a young man who had loved her with a truly romantic passion was almost too burdensome to bear.

That night as they were getting into bed Irina's sense of remorse overpowered discretion. Almost without forethought she told Darwin about the affair with Guy Subjack and how it had ended.

This emotional upheaval seemed not to disturb Darwin. Calmly, he removed his watch and placed it on the stand beside the bed.

"You mustn't let it upset you, my dear. And I'm not blind, you know. I was quite aware of your relationship with Subjack."

Irina recoiled with a startled look. "But we were so careful!"

"Not careful enough." There was a certain unmistakable smugness in his tone.

"And you said not a word!"

"We both said a great many words, after Alex. You see, I really did believe you, Irina. That Alex would be the last."

"And I meant it, darling," she cried. "I truly did. But then I met Guy and . . . You do believe me now, I know, that it can never happen again. After that awful experience I could never look at another man but you. I'm a different person now. I've learned my lesson."

Darwin regarded her with a sorrowful look. "I wish I'd known it was over between you and Subjack. But then it might not have made any difference. It might have happened again with someone else. You're rather like the dragonfly, my love, beautiful, alluring, and voracious. I decided I had to try something drastic. You see, I believed it might possibly change everything if you felt you owed me your life. It worked far better than I'd dared hope."

"What are you saying?"

"You've been honest with me, Irina. I must be honest with you. I staged that 'intruder' attack to bring you to your senses. I hope you'll forgive me as I've so often forgiven you."

When he'd finished explaining precisely how he'd disguised himself and faked the attack, Irina appeared too stunned to speak. Her face had gone whiter than he'd ever seen it. Without a word she turned her back to him and opened the drawer of her nightstand.

* * *

When Daversa had finished conferring with the coroner in the bedroom, he rejoined Irina downstairs. She remained in the same trancelike state of immobility, which might easily have been mistaken for the calmest serenity, as when he'd questioned her. He wasn't sure it would do any good to pursue his inquiries before morning; nevertheless, he asked her if she was still certain it was the same man.

Irina turned her gaze from the lacquered cabinet where she'd hidden the gun. She nodded. For a moment Daversa almost thought he detected the wisp of a smile on her lips, but then it was gone.

"Oh yes, Lieutenant. Don't ask me how I can be so certain, but I am. I would stake my life on it. The same man who tried to kill me was in that bedroom."

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

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a **NEW** short story by

KATE WILHELM

Kate Wilhelm is an author who crosses effortlessly from genre to genre, but as the Washington Post put it, "A taste for horror or science fiction or fantasy or contemporary fiction is not necessary to appreciate Kate Wilhelm. Her work transcends genre." Recently Ms. Wilhelm has been devoting much of her time to crime fiction. In this novella-length work she demonstrates her ability to weave a tale complex not only in plot but in psychology . . .

FOX IN THE BRIARS

by **KATE WILHELM**

The tangle of blackberries looked impenetrable, canes as thick as a man's arm, arching branches fifteen, twenty feet long. Jordan Langford stopped to wipe his face, cursed the leather glove, took it off, and wiped again. He motioned to Will Magnusson to move ahead a few more yards with the tractor. The sickle bar, lowered almost to the ground, cut through the tangled mass very slowly because no one knew if boulders lurked, hidden beneath the greenery, and a boulder would tear up the blade.

He tugged a long, many-branched cane up from the bank of the creek. They couldn't let the canes fall into the water, dam it, cause a flood, wash out the newly planted grapes on the other side of the creek.

It started to rain. For a moment Jordan stopped with his face lifted, mouthing curses; then he ducked his head and weaved his way through brambles to the tractor. "What do you think?"

Will shrugged. "Not much of a rain yet. How about if we just finish the stretch to the bridge?"

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The bridge was two hundred feet away, a little wooden span level with the gravel road that bordered the acreage. Last summer Jordan had uncovered it, but the brambles had reclaimed this side, making it appear that the bridge led only to the thicket to vanish there. He grinned at Will, and they went back to work.

Little Agate Creek was three feet deep and four feet wide, with steep banks, and as Will liked to say, she was a good runner; she had cut a seven- or eight-foot gorge in her race down the mountain.

After a while, the two men changed places. Then Will was signaling with both hands, and Jordan stopped, a few yards short of the bridge. On the gravel road on the south side Ellen Blair grinned and waved from her Mazda. Her short curly hair was frizzy from the damp; she looked like a kid joyriding in a hot car.

Will motioned for him to come. Jordan raised the sickle bar, backed up to more level ground, and turned off the key. Will was at the top of the bank; Ellen, under a bright red and white umbrella, had left her car and was coming toward them.

"Look," Will said, pointing, when Jordan drew near.

Where they had cut the brambles on the bank, the dirt had been loosened enough to uproot branches. In the newly exposed dirt Jordan saw a flash of gold being washed by the rain, and then he saw that the gold was on a bone, a finger bone. He leaned over and picked it up, a finger bone with a ring on it.

"What is it?" Ellen called from the bridge.

He held it up for her to see, and he thought for a second that she was going to faint. The color washed from her face; she swayed and backed up a step, another.

"There's more," Will said. "Leg, ribs . . ."

Ellen ran back to her car, and Jordan yelled after her, "Go to the trailer and call the sheriff."

He looked again at the finger bone, gray with encrusted mud, pitted, a man's finger. The ring was heavy, solid gold maybe, it was fashioned into a coiled snake, its head up and back in striking position, with emerald eyes and a red tongue.

Ellen's hands were shaking too hard to dial the first time she tried. She took a deep breath, and this time placed the call. Then she dug in her purse for her small address book and found the number for the McMinnville library and dialed. Patty Westwood answered.

"They found some bones," Ellen whispered hoarsely. "With his ring. The sheriff's on his way here. Patty, I'll have to tell him about that night."

"For God's sake! Ellen? Is that you? What are you talking about?" Patty's voice sounded distant and strange.

Ellen started over. "I'm at Jordan's, in his trailer. I just called the sheriff. Jordan and Will uncovered bones, a finger bone with Philip's ring. I saw it, Patty! Philip's ring! They'll ask questions."

There was a pause, and when Patty's voice was back it was cool and forceful. "Listen to me, Ellen. Get out of there. Go home. I'll come over as soon as I can—fifteen minutes. Don't wait for the sheriff, just go on home."

Ellen nodded. "All right. But hurry, Patty. Please. I saw the finger, just a bone, with his ring on it!" She was shaking again; she hung up and stood watching the nearly spastic movements of her hands for a second or two before she hurried out to her car and started back to town, five miles away. In her mind's eye she saw the finger bone and the ring with the emerald eyes and the darting ruby tongue.

Suddenly the bone was flesh and blood, and there was another hand with an identical ring, both hands moving back and forth over a shallow pottery bowl, and above the hypnotic motions of the hands, a bare torso with snakes painted on it and a gold necklace made of twined snakes with raised heads, emerald eyes, long red tongues. The gold and the gemstones caught the flashing firelight and gleamed, came alive, writhing . . .

She felt her car swerve, planing, and fought to hold it on the wet road. With the car under control again, she drove more slowly, paying attention now. She entered Crystal Falls on a back street and drove to her apartment, parked, and ran inside.

Her apartment was the ground floor of a three-story house, once an elegant private residence, now three apartments. Inside her door was a foyer with a large mirror on the wall, a closet opposite it. She took off her jacket and hung it up; when she turned she was stopped by her reflection in the mirror. She was ashen, with staring eyes. She hurried to the kitchen, found a bottle of bourbon in the cabinet, and poured some, added water, and drank it down.

After that, she sat at the dinette table and tried to think. It was Philip's finger, she heard herself saying in her head. She could get no further than that. The doorbell rang, and she ran to admit Patty Westwood.

Patty was thirty-five, five years older than Ellen and twenty pounds heavier, a handsome woman with long black hair and brown eyes. Her normally ruddy face was pale; she looked cold. "Tell me,"

she demanded, as she entered the foyer and pulled the door shut.

"I was out at Jordan's. They're clearing the upper section of the land, and Will found a bone, a finger bone, with a gold ring that's like a snake. Philip's ring."

"You don't know that."

"It's Philip's ring," Ellen repeated.

They had gone into the kitchen where Patty tossed her coat over a chair, went to the sink, and started to make coffee. She was within arm's reach of Ellen at the table. The kitchen was small, a table and two chairs made it crowded; the other rooms were large and so sparsely furnished they looked barren.

"Look, Ellen, be reasonable," Patty said, measuring coffee. "You can't be sure. You saw something and got spooked. Maybe it isn't even a bone."

"We'll have to tell them about that night," Ellen whispered.

"You're out of your mind!"

"He didn't just leave."

"Honey, sit down and listen to me." Patty pushed Ellen into a chair and sat opposite her at the small table. "If you even mention that night, and if they really have found bones, and if they identify them as Philip's bones, you're as much as confessing that you know what happened to him. They'll want to know what you were doing out there, what you did after you two left, where you went, everything."

"I didn't leave with him. He sent me away."

"That's not how we remember it," Patty said harshly. "He took you away and never came back."

Ellen shook her head. "He didn't go with me. He gave me his keys and told me to go home, and I did."

Patty stood up and turned back to the counter with the coffee maker; she tapped her fingers impatiently while the water trickled down. "Six people will swear he left with you," she said.

Ellen stared at her in disbelief. She had known Patty all her life, they had worked together in the Blair farm and garden store when Ellen was in high school and Patty at Mount Crystal College. Philip had been one of Patty's instructors, and she had fallen in love with him, just as Ellen had. They had talked about him for hours.

She remembered the first time she met him. No one ever had treated her the way he had, with respect, as if she were important; she had been sixteen. "Ms. Blair, I need a gift for a very special person, flowers, a blooming plant, something of that sort. What do

you recommend?" He had been hired on a two-year contract at the college; everyone in town had known that. In a town of eighteen hundred people there were no secrets. He was rich, they said, and he was handsome, with black wavy hair, a moustache like Burt Reynolds's, a blue and silver customized van. He had been around the world, they said. A doctorate in psychology by twenty-nine, brilliant. He had been thirty when he arrived to teach at the college, and two years later he had left.

Ellen remembered the afternoon Patty had come to the store, so excited she could hardly talk. She had just graduated from Mount Crystal, and Ellen from high school. "This Saturday night," Patty had whispered, "Philip's going to show some of us a Sacred Mushroom ritual!" Six students who had now graduated, she had continued. He had sworn them to secrecy; they were to meet up Crystal River at a campsite, take sleeping bags, be prepared to spend the night . . . Her voice had shaken with excitement.

Ellen had begged and pleaded until Patty had said she could come, too, but she had to stay way back and not make a sound.

Patty was still waiting for the coffee, getting out cups, half and half, sugar, and Ellen was back there, thirteen years ago.

Patty picked her up at her folks' house; it was dusk when they reached the campgrounds. Two other cars were already there. They made their way to the clearing by the river where the others were nursing a small fire in a rock enclosure. The forest was dense and silent and little light filtered through; the rush of the river splashing against rocks was the only sound.

"Why'd you bring her?" John Le Croix demanded angrily, staring at Ellen.

"She's okay," Patty said. "She'll stay back in the trees. I didn't want to come alone."

"Shit," someone else muttered. "Anyone got any matches?"

Someone began to pass a roach around. John and Les Prell had beer, Burt Craxton and Sheila Baum were sharing a bottle, and Beverly was huddled in a blanket humming monotonously; slowly the darkness deepened until there was no light beyond the fire. The rush of water got louder as the night grew darker. Ellen didn't know how long they had been there; they smoked and drank, some of them vanished into the woods, reappeared; there was giggling as they slipped in and out of sleeping bags. She watched the fire, frightened because it flared and roared, died to a spark, flared.

Then he was there. She had not seen him arrive, but suddenly he was standing at the far end of the group, a towering figure in a dark cloak that swept the ground. Silently he unfastened it at his neck and let it drop. She bit her thumb to keep from crying out. He was wearing a short skirt and sandals, and was covered with snakes, painted on his bare torso, on his thighs, his arms. Golden snakes gleamed on his chest, a necklace of twined snakes with emerald eyes that reflected the fire, scarlet tongues that caught and threw back flames. Golden snakes gleamed on his fingers; he was carrying a shallow bowl in both hands. She had never seen anyone so beautiful, or so terrifying.

Silently the others began to move, to crawl out of the sleeping bags, form a ragged circle around the fire. Ellen shrank back against a tree trunk. He didn't stir until they were all motionless again, and then he melted down gracefully to a cross-legged position on the cloak. Carefully he placed the bowl on the ground, and began to move his hands over it, chanting in a low voice. She could make out nothing of what he said, neither could she turn away from the sinuous motions of his hands. The painted snakes rippled; the golden snakes began to writhe, to flex and draw back . . .

She forgot that her legs had started to cramp, that the tree was gouging her spine, that her eyes were burning. Then he stood up and came to her; she was paralyzed until he reached out and took her hands, drew her up to her feet. He walked her away from the others, out of the firelight to the parking area, his arm around her shoulders, guiding her, supporting her. Her gaze was on the pale disk of light that flowed on the trail before them, over stones, up and over a tree limb. At his van he stopped and opened the door, took keys from the seat, and handed them to her.

"Go home, Ms. Blair. Go home and forget all this." He took her face in his hands and said softly, "The ceremony isn't for children." He kissed her forehead and half lifted her to the van seat; he reached past her to turn on the headlights and then closed the door.

Burning with humiliation, she turned the key, engaged the gear, and sped away. She stopped at the first curve in the road to wipe her eyes, and had to stop to do it again a moment later. She realized that it was not only tears making the drive seem impossible; the road was expanding, contracting to a line, expanding again . . . She stopped driving, started, stopped again; the ten-mile drive was an eternity.

She felt the fire on her cheeks at the memory, and turned away

from Patty who was bringing two mugs of coffee to the table.

"Listen, Ellen," Patty said carefully, as if she had been thinking hard. "There's no point in talking about that night. Six other people involved, all brought down in the dirt . . . Honey, you can't get away with that story, that he handed you his keys and you took off. It just won't wash."

Ellen started to protest, but Patty held up her hand. "Let's say he drove you home and was heading back, but he picked up someone along the way. That makes sense. He would have picked up a woman, you know. And after that, God knows what happened. But it doesn't involve you or any of us."

"You never asked me what happened," Ellen said after a moment. "I would have told you exactly what I've just said. I drove myself home."

"You were so high you don't know what you were doing!"

"I was high, but not as high as the rest of you, and I wasn't drinking. What happened out there? What did you do with the mushrooms?"

Patty shrugged. "We ate them and went to sleep. Let me tell you what Les said, honey. When you two disappeared and didn't come back, he said, so the littlest pussy swallowed the king snake. Sheila tried to climb over the fire to clobber him."

"He was probably standing behind the trees watching you all make fools of yourselves, and laughing," Ellen snapped.

"And walked home practically naked and covered with snakes?"

"Why didn't you ever bring it up, ask me about it if you thought I went with him?"

"I was mad at you. Everyone else was mad at both of us. I've never talked about that night with anyone."

Ellen sipped her coffee.

Patty leaned across the table and put her hand on Ellen's arm. "One more thing, honey. We have to think this through. No one's going to accuse you of anything, you were only seventeen, but if the sheriff thinks you went off with a naked man and your father saw him, what conclusion do you suppose he'll come to?"

Ellen nearly dropped her mug; coffee splashed across the table. The sheriff's son, Burt Craxton, had been one of the students. If the sheriff's son said she left with Philip, and the others said that, the next step, she admitted, could drag her father into it.

Patty was scowling into the distance. She said, "When they investigated thirteen years ago, did anyone ask you a single question?"

"No."

"And no one will now. Why would they? You were a kid. So just sit tight. Don't volunteer anything. You don't have to lie. Just keep your mouth shut, it's that simple."

Silently Ellen nodded. What she had thought back then was that he had returned to the group at the fire, that they had had an orgy of some kind, and afterward he had left town, left the state, satisfied. A month later, when they discovered some of his things in his apartment, she had continued to believe that; he had taken what he wanted, left everything else. She had been relieved as day after day passed without his appearance; she would have died of mortification if he had walked into the store.

She still believed he had gone back to the group at the fire, and something terrible had happened there. Of the six, Patty was the only one she had known well, who was her friend; the others were no more than acquaintances. If this was Patty's story, she felt there was no need to ask the rest of them anything at all. She stood up. "You'd better go. Jordan's coming over, and I need a shower."

For a moment Patty hesitated, then she got up. "It might not even be Philip, honey, remember that." She pulled on her coat and left without saying anything else. Ellen locked the door behind her.

She wiped up the spilled coffee and then remained indecisively at the table. She had to shower, she told herself; Jordan was coming. She wished suddenly that he had never come to Crystal Falls, that he had stayed down in California. They had met eighteen months earlier, a few months after she had returned home. Maria Cutter had told Ellen's father about a newly vacant apartment, and Ellen had gone to Papa's Pasta House to have dinner and ask Maria about it. Then Maria had spotted Jordan and rolled her eyes, muttering about another single. She couldn't seat two more singles on a Saturday night, how about if they shared a table instead. Ellen had glanced at him and said, sure, she didn't mind, and he had nodded after a slight hesitation.

"I'm Ellen Blair," she had said as soon as they were seated. "And you're Jordan Langford. You bought Jespersen's sheep pasture in order to plant grapes. You live in a trailer, but you'll build a house up on Crystal River Road, and you work from dawn to dark." She had laughed, and added, "Welcome to Crystal Falls, population eighteen hundred, and no secrets."

How easily they had talked that evening. He had said, "Thirty-five. I went to school, got married, got unmarried, worked the vine-

yards in California, went to Italy and worked vineyards there. Inherited a little from grandparents and came looking for land. Winemaker."

She had nodded. "Twenty-eight. School, married, unmarried, job, laid off, home again. New job at the college. Flunky to the president."

"Now we know each other," he had said.

He had walked her to her parents' house next to the farm and garden store they owned. Over the next month she walked him all over town, to the waterfall that gave the town its name, to her old high school, the Mount Crystal College campus where Little Agate Creek tumbled over rocks to join Crystal River in a cauldron of foam.

They drove to the coast, twenty-five miles away, and on a clear day they hiked to the top of Mount Crystal, from where they could see the ocean in the west and the high Cascades in the east. He helped her move; she offered him the use of her bathtub, and they went to bed together.

"No commitment," she had whispered. "No ties. We're both still free."

He had nodded then, but more recently she had started to feel pressured, not so much by his insistence on a commitment, but rather by his apparent belief that such a commitment already existed.

Her marriage had started out in the prescribed perfect bliss and ended in a predictable hellish discord; she was not ready to try it again. Knowing they both had been too young, too immature, did not ease the hurt; her problem was that she was not at all certain she was much more mature now than she had been five years earlier.

If only Jordan had never come here, she thought, then sheep would still be grazing in the pasture, the blackberries would still be growing thicker and thicker each year. Philip's bones would still be buried.

That night she asked Jordan not to talk about it, knowing they were the only people in town not talking about it, and she sent him away early.

Five weeks later, Ellen was working in Hilde Melton's office when the secretary buzzed Hilde to say the sheriff was there.

"Well, let him come in," Hilde said, getting up from her desk.

Hilde Melton was generally considered to be a good-looking woman; Ellen thought she was beautiful. She rode a bicycle, hiked, walked for miles, ate properly, and at fifty-three she was envied by many of the students in their twenties. Her dark hair was starting to show gray in streaks. Janice Ayers, head of the psychology department, had said with a sigh, "Even getting gray is glamorous on her."

"Hilde," the sheriff said, entering with another man, "we have to talk to you."

Ellen hurried to the door. "I'll start on some of that right away," she said, and left.

"They identified the bones," the secretary, Rita, whispered in the outer office.

"How do you know?"

"Wanna bet?"

Ellen shook her head and went to her own tiny office where she was supposed to make phone calls to try to find someone who would maintain the school's bicycles for less than Homer Wylie was charging. Instead, she stared at the wall with her hands clenched on her desk. After they found the bones, enough to say it had been a man, and a ring and the necklace, she had pretended nothing else would happen, that they wouldn't identify him, that no one would admit recognizing the jewelry they had displayed on television, in newspaper photographs. An investigation was ongoing, but it had nothing to do with her. It would all pass, she had told herself as the talk died down; people would forget.

She had lived her life exactly as always, work, dinner with her parents once a week, dates with Jordan, and if her sleep was restless and her appetite gone, no one had noticed. Now and then she had found herself in front of the television with no awareness of what she had been watching, or she had found a book in her hands with no memory of having read anything in it. No one suspected anything unusual about her, she told herself; she was handling it.

But what had happened when Philip went back to the group at the fire? The question formed and re-formed through her daylight hours, and woke her with its persistence during the night. Patty had called several times, left messages; Sheila Baum Craxton had called; Beverly Kirchner had called, and Les Prell. She had returned none of the calls.

"Hey, Ellen, you asleep or something?"

Ellen jerked her eyes open to see Rita in the doorway. "Headache," she said.

"Dr. Melton wants you, like pronto."

When Ellen returned to the president's office, Hilde was sitting behind her desk, grim-faced. The sheriff was studying the titles of books in a glass case; the other man stood up, regarding her with interest.

"Ellen, you know Sheriff Craxton, don't you?" The sheriff was tall and thin; he looked tired. They nodded politely to each other.

"And this is Lieutenant Haliday from the state police special investigation unit. Ellen Blair, my administrative assistant," Hilde said.

Haliday was about forty, with black hair, dark eyes. He was dressed in a dark suit, with a bright blue tie. He smiled at her in a friendly way and turned back to Hilde.

As if cued, Hilde said, "Lieutenant Haliday is in charge of the investigation into the death of Philip Seymour, who taught here fifteen years ago. He will require help in locating files. For the time being, you will be the liaison between the lieutenant and the college, assist him in any way you can. He'll tell you what he wants. And see what conference room is available for him to use as an office for the next few days." She looked at the lieutenant. "Is that sufficient?" she asked bitterly.

"Yes, ma'am. I think so." He seemed to be the only one in the room at ease.

"Very well, then," Hilde said, nodding to Ellen. "When you finish, will you drop by the house? We'll have to go over whatever other tasks you have to abandon, see if they can be put off for the present." She drew her phone closer. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to start calling the trustees." She looked fierce. Hers would be the hardest job, it was clear.

Walking with the sheriff and the detective down the wide corridor to the marble stairs to the second floor, Ellen was aware of the curious looks from work-study students at the front desk, from several people who just happened to step out of their offices as the trio passed. A cluster of students fell into silence at the foot of the stairs and stared at them frankly.

"Pretty building," Haliday said. "Looks like a pretty campus, from what I've seen of it. Maybe you can show me around later."

Ellen nodded. Conference Room A was too big, Haliday said when she opened the door to it. She went on down the hall to Conference Room D, and he said fine, just fine. The sheriff glanced around it, seemed to be waiting for something, and when it was not forthcoming

ing, he shrugged. "I'll be at the mayor's office, you need anything." He hesitated another second and left.

Haliday closed the door after him. He began to move about the room. He was compact; although his movements were quick and decisive, they also were fluid, like a cat's. He regarded the long conference table with ten chairs, and extra chairs along one wall. Cabinets under the windows were empty, but there was a coffee maker on a table. He pointed at it inquiringly. "Fixings go with this?" he asked.

"I can have coffee brought in," Ellen said.

"Relaxes people sometimes, having something to do with their hands," he said amiably. He picked up a chair, carried it across the room to the wall with the other extras. "Did you know him?"

She started. "No. I knew who he was, that's all."

He picked up another chair. "What did you know about him?"

"Nothing. I mean, he was a teacher here, people said he was rich. He was handsome. He came to the store a few times."

"He wasn't a gardener, was he?" He continued to rearrange the furniture.

Ellen shook her head. "He bought cut flowers, or potted plants."

"Did he have them delivered?"

"We didn't deliver. He just took them with him."

"Talk to you?"

"No."

He surveyed the table; he had left four chairs, one at the head. "That's better. Now the windows." He went to the wide windows and gazed out. Beyond and below was a view of the rhododendrons in bloom, and massive fir trees that towered over the building. "Don't know," he said. "Might be distracting, but it's familiar. What do you think?"

"About what?"

He grinned at her. "Would you rather look at the trees or at me if I'm asking you questions?"

She stared at him.

He laughed and returned to the table and pulled out a chair. "Sit down, let's talk a minute." She sat down and he took a chair opposite her; she was facing the windows. He nodded. "I'll leave the drapes open, I think. See, Blair, by the time you get out of here today, everyone in town will know I've recruited you. You're going to be hit with a zillion questions. Rumors will be thicker than bees in a swarm. Maybe you're the only one who'll have the straight story,

so I thought I might as well give it to you. They'll believe what they want, regardless of what you say." He shrugged. "I'm from a small town myself, I know how that works. Okay. First, why me and why not the sheriff. The Seymour family is very wealthy, richer than you'd believe a family could be. And they know everyone; they've been on the phone to the governor, the FBI, Congress . . . They are not happy with the sheriff. They say if he hadn't bungled his investigation thirteen years ago, this would have been settled then. They seem to believe the sheriff and the college have a cozy arrangement whereby he never makes trouble for a student, and his sons get scholarships, something like that." He spread his hands. "Me, I don't know from nothing. Everyone believed Philip Seymour left under his own power in his own van, and you can't fault them. No signs of violence, nothing was there to indicate otherwise. Anyway, I'm in charge."

"Why are you telling me this?" Ellen asked. "I can't repeat anything like that."

"You don't have to. But there will be rumors, and they'll be nasty before this is all over. If you're going to help out, it will be easier if you know my position. You didn't go to school here, did you?" He waited for her to shake her head. "See, no old loyalties to get in the way. Next thing, the forensic lab guys say Seymour was naked when he was killed. That's going to be all over town, too."

She swallowed hard and felt her stomach spasm. "He was killed? How?"

"His head was bashed in." He regarded her for a moment, then said, "Stretch out your hand, Blair, this way."

He was mad, she thought then. They had put a madman in charge. He nodded at her and reluctantly she stretched her arm out across the table; she could not reach the other side.

"My point," he said softly. "Out of reach. Someone was close enough to a naked Philip Seymour to hit him over the head." He touched his own temple. "Right about here. I'm afraid the rumor mill will run overtime with this one." He stood up. "Let's take a walk. The psychology building, dorms, faculty housing, archives storage . . . I'll think of the rest while we're walking."

It was after five when he walked with her through the terraced gardens to the president's mansion. At the top of a flight of brick steps he paused to look back over the campus. "Don't they get younger every year."

All afternoon more and more students had appeared on the grounds until now it seemed that most of the student body was visible, moving without too much obvious purpose toward the student union building and the cafeteria in the basement. A few months ago she would have been more comfortable down there with them than up here. Today they looked like children.

He started to walk again. The campus was terraced throughout; up here the terraces were gardens, a rose garden, spring bulbs in full bloom, rhododendrons, azaleas . . .

At the entrance to the house, he stopped and said, "Thanks for the tour, Blair. Bright and early tomorrow. Go on in for your grilling now." He grinned.

Hilde opened the door. "Come in, Ellen." She nodded coolly to the lieutenant. He turned and walked away.

"Ellen, I can't tell you how sorry I am to saddle you with his work," Hilde said as she led her through the wide entrance foyer, past the formal rooms to a small sitting room in the rear of the house.

The parts of the house that Ellen had seen before were all formal interior-decorator rooms; this was personal. Shelves were cluttered with artifacts from around the world, Indonesian dolls, African masks, pottery . . . Walter Melton had been an archaeologist, had traveled extensively, and had collected whatever took his fancy. One wall was covered with diplomas, certificates, plaques. Tables were laden with books; wall hangings from Brazil, silk prayer rugs . . . It was like walking into an eclectic museum.

Janice Ayers was seated in a leather-covered chair holding a drink. She smiled at Ellen and mouthed, "Sit down," pointing to another chair.

Janice Ayers was in her forties, tall and graceful, with long pale hair that she wore in a loose chignon at the nape of her neck. She lived with Michael Wyland when he was in town and rumor had it that when the former president of the college had suggested that she either marry the man or give him up, she had laughed. Most of the time Wyland was in Seattle, where he had a computer business.

"That lieutenant," Hilde was saying, "said he would bring in people to go through the files, and he would interview all of us down in City Hall. The idea of going to town one by one to be questioned! To have strangers pawing through files . . ." She went to a table with liquor, wine, glasses. "What would you like, Ellen? Wine? Something stronger?"

Ellen said wine.

"We're mapping our strategy," Hilde said, pouring white wine. "No statements to the press, first of all. I already posted that. All statements come from the president's office." She handed the glass to Ellen. "I'll want a record of everything he copies. I already told him copies only; he can't have originals of our files."

Janice laughed. "Hilde, forget it. You're not in charge. I think the police will take what they want."

Hilde's mouth tightened. "We'll see. He intends to drag the college into whatever mess he stirs up; I intend to limit the damage."

Janice laughed again.

Ellen felt as if she had intruded on an ongoing argument between two old friends. Janice was mocking and sardonic, Hilde was angry, but there was a deep understanding between them. Ellen avoided looking at either of them, looked instead at the commemorative wall ahead.

Janice took a sip of her drink. "What we really want, Ellen," she said, "is a blow-by-blow account. Tell."

Ellen glanced at Hilde, who nodded, and she repeated everything the lieutenant had said to her, and described the tour. "Stuff is in boxes, as well as the files, it's a mess in archives. He said someone will be there to help me. I suppose he really means to keep an eye on me, make sure I don't hide anything."

"Family influence," Hilde murmured when Ellen finished. "That explains why Roy is cooling his heels."

"He botched it," Janice said flatly. "The sheriff didn't want to make waves. I told him Philip wouldn't have gone off and left the stuff he did. Expensive clothes, a thousand-dollar typewriter, television. Philip had money, but he wasn't irresponsible about it. There weren't any personal letters, and his manuscript was missing. Just the wrong mix of what was there and what was missing."

"How do you know that?" Hilde asked.

"I saw the inventory the sheriff made. Seems I'm the only one who'd admit to having been in Philip's apartment." She set her glass down on a table. "We arrived here a week apart fifteen years ago, had our little fling early on, and went our own ways, but I knew he was writing a book, and I knew there should have been letters. I told the sheriff. Pryor was riding him harder than I was, it's that simple."

Warren Pryor had been the president until his retirement eight years earlier, when Hilde was appointed to replace him. Ellen had

never met Pryor. She said slowly, "I don't see how anything can come of an investigation now, after so many years. Too many people have left, or died."

"Exactly," Hilde said. "It's obvious that he picked up a woman somewhere, parked with her, and they fought. She killed him, panicked probably, and just drove away in his van after she dumped his body. A hitchhiker, someone here for the commencement, a transient . . . We'll never know."

Patty's version of what happened, Ellen thought. She had hardly touched her wine. Now she drank it all, wanting to be gone, wanting to be at home.

"And she just left all that gold behind," Janice said. "Not terribly likely, is it? I hear it's worth thousands as jewelry, and if it's authentic antiquity, it's priceless." She stood up. "Well, we have things to think about. Hilde, go with the flow. Okay? The school can weather a little scandal. The sky won't fall. You ready, Ellen? I'll walk to your car with you."

They walked in silence through the gardens now lighted with warm yellow lanterns; as they were drawing near the Mazda in the parking lot Janice put her hand on Ellen's arm. "If this really bugs you, bow out. You don't have to work for the police, you realize. Not in your job description."

Ellen's mouth was dry. "What do you mean?"

"Look how you're shaking. Your hands were shaking back in the house. Something's under your skin, and if it's Philip Seymour, call in sick. Or, you know how it goes, just say no." She withdrew her hand. "See you." Her hair gleamed like gold under the brilliant lights in the parking lot as she walked away.

In her car Ellen sat watching her hands, which had become quite steady. But they had noticed. She bit her lip and turned the key. She could handle it, she told herself. Overactive imagination, she would say; this was her first murder, after all. She would laugh. Her hands were too tight on the steering wheel; she forced them to relax.

Her apartment was a mile from the school, usually a pleasant walk, but today she had driven in order to go to the Safeway to shop for dinner. Instead, she drove straight home; she knew everyone in the market, knew the people who would be shopping there, and they would all be full of questions. Parked in front of her apartment house was Jordan's car; he was leaning against it, talking to a woman. He waved when Ellen pulled into her driveway. The woman

turned and now Ellen could see her: Beverly Kirchner. She gritted her teeth.

They came forward as she got out of her car. "Hi, Ellen," Beverly said. "I'm covering this story for my paper. Ask you a few questions?"

"Sorry," Ellen said. "Comments will come from the president's office only. Or the police." She started to walk.

"Hey, Ellen, come on." Beverly caught Ellen's arm. "It's me. Tomorrow there's going to be a million outsiders asking questions. Give me a break, okay? What's the lieutenant after at the school? Are they trying to link the death to someone there? Why are you working for the police? Is it true that Seymour was naked?"

"Can't comment," Ellen said, shrugging away from her hand.

For a moment Beverly dug in, her eyes narrowed; then she grinned and moved back a step. "Did you volunteer to help, or were you drafted?" Ellen moved toward her door. "Well, if you aren't talking, I guess that's my story. Who gagged you, Melton or the police?"

Beverly had always been insistent, Ellen remembered; being a reporter had not given her that trait, merely sharpened it. Beverly was watching her with an intense look. Slowly Ellen said, "I'm not talking, Bev." For an instant Ellen saw her as she had been that night, knees drawn up with her chin on them, her arms wrapped around her legs, a blanket over her shoulders, rocking back and forth, humming tunelessly.

Beverly nodded. "I'll be around town for a while. Be seeing you, I guess. Nice meeting you, Jordan. So long." She strode away down the street.

"Just a second," Jordan said then and hurried to his car, brought out a grocery bag, and joined her at the door. "Thought I'd make us some dinner," he said. "Okay?"

Inside, he went to the kitchen with his groceries, and she went to the living room, where it appeared that her answering machine was stuck on blink. She knew who had made six of the calls, she thought, and her parents would have called, and then many more people. She sat on her sofa and called her mother.

It was an unsatisfactory call in every way. Her mother put her on conference call, but her father never had any small talk, and all her mother wanted to talk about was "the case." After Ellen said she couldn't discuss it, her mother was silent for a moment, but recovered with a rush of inconsequential about weather, the store, her new glasses . . .

"Mom, Jordan's cooking, and I'd better go help," Ellen said finally. "I'll be over Friday. Don't worry. I'll just be looking up old files. Dirty work, that's all."

After they hung up, she sat without moving, thinking what her father would have done if he had caught her with an older, naked man. He would not have hit him over the head and dumped his body in a thicket of blackberries. He would have beat the crap out of him on the spot. But who else would believe that?

Dinner was steaks and potatoes and salad, all very good. And Jordan was almost aggressively cheerful, to the point where Ellen wanted to yell at him to stop smiling, stop chattering. Neither mentioned Beverly Kirchner until the table was cleared and they had coffee.

"Old friend, she said," Jordan commented. "But if you two are friends, I don't ever want to see you with an enemy."

"Old acquaintance is more like it," she muttered. "Did she get a story from you?"

"Just what's been in the news for a month now. That's all I know." He hesitated and then said, "Ellen, you can't talk about it. Understood. But something's bugging the bejesus out of you. Maybe you need to talk to someone about it."

She felt herself grow tense with his words. How transparent she must be to everyone—Janice Ayers, Jordan . . . who else? "Thanks," she said. "I'm just jumpy. Not used to seeing bones dug up. My first murder, after all." It sounded as faked as it was. She couldn't manage the laugh.

Although he did not move, she knew he recoiled as if she had rejected him physically. Where he had been excessively cheerful a few minutes earlier, he now became excessively polite, and she felt powerless to remove the barrier she had erected. They stood up and finished clearing the table, washed the few dishes, and then faced each other awkwardly.

"You'd better go," she said. "Someone probably will make a note of how long you stay. You know, if there's no real story, create one."

"I expect your machine will go into overtime mode; I won't add to it. Will you call me?"

She felt they had come to a crisis of some kind, that it had to do with trust, and hurt, and his new awareness of the fragility of their relationship. She would deal with it later, not now. "I'll call," she said. "Thanks. For dinner, for . . . Just thanks."

He shrugged and went to get his jacket, and then paused at the door. "Call me," he said, and left.

Later, soaking in the long deep tub, she regretted that he had not had his usual bath. He always liked to bathe in her old-fashioned tub that let him stretch out and relax. She thought of his words: *maybe you need to talk to someone about it*. In a town of eighteen hundred people, most of them familiar, some of them lifelong friends, there was not a single one she could talk to about that night.

She could imagine the questions: Six people saw you leave with him; where did you go? Did he seduce you? Have sex? Did he hit you? Did you hit him? Did he drive you home afterward? Did your father see you messed up, bloodied maybe?

What happened back at the fire? She closed her eyes against the pictures that surged in, and after a moment she thought, what happened to his van? Someone must have driven it away; someone else followed in a different car. They must have driven it off a cliff, into a gorge, maybe up the Columbia River, into the river somewhere. Then they came back.

They would get away with it, she thought dully. They wouldn't tell on each other, and she couldn't tell. Eventually the police would have to accept the idea that Philip had picked up a woman, fought, got killed, and she had driven his van away. What else could they think?

Lists of instructors who had been at the school the two years Philip had taught, follow-up lists: when they left, where they went, who was still here. Lists of his students, more follow-up lists. Lists of his subjects, course descriptions.

"What about the maintenance people, the cafeteria workers?" Ellen had asked bitterly, and Haliday had grinned. "Them, too."

Now she stood in the doorway to the archives room with Winona Kelly, who was to assist her. She was a middle-aged woman with dyed black hair and gold-rimmed glasses. Earlier, Haliday had given the orders: When they found the files, Kelly would copy them, Blair would double-check, initial them, and restore the originals to their proper place. "That should satisfy your Dr. Melton," Haliday had said. He had waved them out as Janice Ayers entered the conference room. The drapes were open.

"Okay," Winona Kelly said. "Let's get at them." She chewed gum.

The recent files were in good order, Hilde Melton would have seen to that, but Dr. Pryor had been lax in his oversight, or had had

inept help in archives. Ellen was sitting on the floor scanning one paper after another from a cardboard carton, laying them aside one by one. Winona Kelly was at a file cabinet pulling personnel files. Ellen glanced up to see Lieutenant Haliday in the doorway.

"How's it coming?"

"Slowly," Ellen said.

"Well, let's break for lunch," he said. "I thought that down here in the catacombs, you might not realize what time it's getting to be." He said to Winona Kelly, "You can go over to the cafeteria, no one's going to pester you with questions. And you," he said to Ellen, "can come up to the conference room with me. I'm having stuff sent in. They're lying in wait for you, I'm afraid. Reporters."

She saw what he meant as soon as they emerged from the library building. A clump of strangers rushed forward, along with Beverly Kirchner. A few flashbulbs flared. "Hey, Ms. Blair, what are you looking for down there?" "Did he really teach witchcraft?" "Are the files intact?"

Haliday took her arm firmly and walked through them.

"Is she a suspect?"

His hand tightened and his pace quickened as they moved along the path toward the administration building. She was out of breath when they reached the building and went inside. An officer at the door barred the reporters.

"See what I mean?" Haliday said cheerfully. "You'll want to wash up a bit. See you upstairs."

Hilde Melton appeared at her door. "Come use my washroom, Ellen." She moved aside to let Ellen pass.

Ellen thought Hilde was going to question her again, and steeled herself, but all Hilde said was, "We've brought in security to keep them out of the buildings and away from the dorms, but we can't keep them off the grounds altogether." She looked very tired. Her phone was ringing. "It's been like that all morning," she said, going to pick it up. "Parents."

Rita would be shunting other calls to other departments, Ellen knew, but only Hilde could deal with upset parents. She nodded sympathetically and went into the washroom.

When Ellen got to the conference room, Haliday was eating a sandwich. He waved toward a tray with more sandwiches, a carton of milk with glasses, and fruit. She helped herself to a sandwich and sat down opposite him.

They ate in silence. He poured milk, poured for her when she nodded, and then he said, "Problem here is there's just too much coming and going. Take a corporation now; people get hired and they stay put. But here you've got a couple hundred new students year after year, couple hundred old ones hitting the road, gone. Besides those who drop out. And the teachers drifting in and out on one- or two-year contracts. Makes for a real problem." He looked at her appraisingly. "I take it the files are another problem."

"The old ones are," she said. "And the old temporary-instructor files are jammed into boxes every which way. I don't think they were sorted at all."

"When you come across his student lists, think you'll recognize names of locals?"

"Maybe. Some of them anyway. But I'd have to double-check. Thirteen years is a long time; most of them have left the area. Besides, I don't really know everyone from around here."

"Dr. Melton seems to think you do," he commented. "She thinks pretty highly of you. Grooming you to take her place when she retires?"

Ellen felt her face grow hot. "No, of course not. I'm nothing more than her gofer."

"Isn't that what she was for the last president?"

"It's not the same. She had a doctorate already, and I have a bachelor's degree. She was more like a vice president."

"So how'd you land your job here?"

Ellen curbed her exasperation. "I happened to be in the right place at the right time. She mentioned in the store one day that she was looking for an assistant. I had just lost my job, and I was available. She hired me. Since it's a private school they don't have to go through the procedures the public universities do. It was that simple."

He held up his hand, grinning. "Peace, Blair. I'm making polite conversation like they taught me in charm school. Not looking for sore toes to step on."

Unexpectedly she laughed. "I think you must have flunked the course." Then she watched as he reached into his pocket and took out a dollar and transferred it to a different pocket. "What are you doing?"

"Made a bet with myself that I'd get a laugh out of you before you went back to work." He bit into an apple. "What do you think about the hitchhiker theory?"

He was working all the time, she told herself. She had to remember that, no matter how much fooling around he did. She said slowly, "I don't see any other way to account for the missing van."

"Yeah, that's the problem. The goddam van. But you see, it compounds the other problem. The missing personal stuff. And the fortune in gold. Tell me, would a hitchhiker go to his apartment and steal a manuscript and private letters, and leave that gold behind?" He shook his head. Then he asked, "What's it like around graduation? What's the usual schedule?"

She told him. Finals week, senior dance, parties, the commencement exercises on Wednesday.

"And they take off right after Wednesday?"

"Most of them. All the parties are the week before, then the parents show up, and they leave."

"How about the teachers?"

"They have their celebration on the Friday night after commencement. A dinner dance. Some of the trustees attend. It's a big formal event."

He nodded. "Yeah, that's what I keep hearing. So Seymour was at the party Friday night, and no one ever saw him again. And no one gave it a thought that they didn't see him again. Does that make sense?"

"I think so," she said. "He would have cleaned out his office, ready to leave any time. The permanent staff hang around another week or so usually, or even year-round, but the temporaries just take off." She frowned. "But you'd think someone would have noticed if he didn't tell them goodbye."

"Exactly," Haliday said approvingly. "Dr. Melton says she and her husband went to the coast early Saturday, and when she got back on Thursday or Friday, he was gone. So she didn't even think about a goodbye. Pryor and his wife went to Hawaii on Saturday, stayed three weeks. So far that's all I've been hearing; they took off for a little vacation, or went fishing or something. So no one told him so long and no one thought it was strange."

There was a tap on the door. He called out, "Come on in." Winona Kelly and a uniformed officer entered. Haliday glanced at his watch and stood up. "Back to the grind," he said. "See you later, Blair."

She walked back to the library between the uniformed officer and Winona Kelly, with reporters shouting questions every step of the way. She felt like a prisoner.

That afternoon Winona Kelly delivered several packets of copied files to the lieutenant, and Ellen began to feel that perhaps the job was not as hopeless as it had appeared.

When they quit for the day the archivist, Mr. Rosenthal, was waiting for Ellen. "He questioned me," he said. He sounded quite happy. He had been on the spot here when the first brick was laid, Ellen thought; of course he would be questioned. "Not that I had anything to contribute," Mr. Rosenthal said. "Frankly, I don't even remember the man." He started to walk away, then stopped. "Oh, the reason I interrupted you. Dr. Melton sent word for you to report to her office. That's it."

Shit, Ellen muttered under her breath. When they left the library no reporters were in sight among the swarm of students on their way to the cafeteria. A light rain was falling. It was the kind of rain that locals paid no attention to; if they carried umbrellas, they usually didn't bother to unfurl them for this kind of mist, but Winona began to run with her purse over her head. Maybe her dye would wash out, Ellen thought sourly. Suddenly Beverly Kirchner fell into step beside her.

"Slow down, Ellen. A couple of us want to talk to you. Tonight. About nine or a little after, your place."

"There's nothing to say," Ellen said. "I told you, I'm not talking. Not to anyone. You think I'm crazy?"

"Why are you spending so much time with the cops? Are they putting pressure on you?"

"I'm an acting file clerk, for God's sake! Leave me alone, Bev. You, all of you. Just leave me alone!"

Beverly clutched her arm. "You realize that some of them are desperate? If they thought you'd wreck their lives . . . They're really desperate, Ellen. Believe me!"

Ellen stopped walking, pulling Beverly to a halt with her. Students moved around them on both sides. "Do you think I'm not desperate?" she demanded. "I'm not crazy, and I'm not stupid. Now bug off!"

She began to walk again, swiftly this time. Bev did not keep up. And no nine o'clock rendezvous, she should have said.

Winona was waiting for her at the administration building entrance. "They're in the president's office," she said. "And I'm off. See you tomorrow." She had found an umbrella somewhere. It was the only one in sight when she left.

Ellen knocked on Hilde's door. Rita was already gone from the outer office, her computer covered. The door opened and Janice Ayers stepped aside to admit her.

Hilde was standing behind her desk, both hands palm down on it. She was speaking in a low, vehement voice. "Lieutenant, this is lunacy. What difference will a few days make now? You have to take your people off this campus, at least until next week when the students will be gone for spring break. Everyone knows what must have happened to Philip Seymour, and it has nothing to do with this school. Mary Grayling was in tears this afternoon. She had to cancel her classes. The students are in a turmoil. Parents are threatening to remove them entirely. And for what? A senseless disruption that is utterly fruitless."

Haliday had glanced at Ellen when she arrived, then turned his attention back to Hilde. Now he said in a respectful tone, "I understand, Dr. Melton. Believe me, I do. We'll be as discreet and fast as we can, I assure you."

Hilde slapped the desk hard and turned to Ellen. "Is that what you've been pulling from the files?"

"Yes," Ellen said. She crossed the room and handed Hilde a file folder. "If that's all, I'd better be going."

Hilde waved her away and started to scan the notes Ellen had prepared. "For God's sake! His entire student roster from fifteen years ago!" She closed the folder and sat down.

"Is this the student newspaper?" Haliday asked suddenly. He picked up the newspaper from a table. "How often does it come out?"

Hilde glared at him. "Biweekly."

Haliday said to Ellen, "When you finish in the archives, think you could round up copies of the paper for the time Seymour was teaching here?"

This time Ellen glared. "I don't know."

"Try," he said placatingly. "That's all we can do, isn't it? Try."

"They'll be on microfiche," Janice said then. "In the journalism department. They keep everything."

Ellen could feel rebellion rising—*microfiche!*—but before she could voice it, Haliday said, "You ready to leave? I'll walk you to your car. You did drive, didn't you?"

She darted a glance at Hilde, who was pale with fury. It was very clear who was in charge, who was deciding when to call a halt to the meeting, when to dismiss Ellen. She had never seen Hilde so angry, and was relieved to escape before she gave voice to her anger.

Janice could take it, she thought, but at that moment she didn't think she could. It was all just too much, she decided, hurrying to the door. Too damn much.

At the entrance to the building they paused. It was raining harder. "What were you so hot about when you came in?" he asked.

"A reporter," she snapped, and zipped up her jacket.

"Ah. Well, let's do it."

He intended to go to the car with her, she realized, and began to run across the parking lot. When they reached the Mazda, he said, "You have time to do me a little favor?" He had stopped at the passenger side; she ran on to the driver's side and opened the door.

"What?"

"A little spin around the campus, that's all." He pulled the other door open and got inside before she could respond. She slid in behind the wheel. "See, I've been all over it in daylight, but not at night. I thought it might be a good idea to do it with someone who knows what the different buildings are. Okay?"

Silently she started the car. She drove slowly on the narrow road that wound through the campus; many students were walking here and there, many with umbrellas now. Each building was screened by trees and bushes; paths with yellow lamplights led up and down from the road. There were many terraces, many stairs. She pointed out the buildings they passed; the science building, the library, gym. The math building showed many lights. "Computer freaks," she said. She drove past the dorms, the highest buildings on campus, and on to College Road.

"Left," he said.

With resignation she made the turn, and almost instantly there were deep woods on both sides of the blacktop road. When they came to the juncture with Staley Road that led to Jordan's property, he told her to turn left again, and she realized he wanted to make a circuit of the perimeter of the college grounds. The deep woods continued on the left; there were fields on the right now. At Washington Street she turned again without waiting for his instructions, but she came to a stop when they reached Crystal River Road. Town was to the right, the campus to the left. He said left, but then he had her turn again at the first road, which curved around the faculty housing.

"Who actually lives there?" he asked.

"Temporaries, visiting lecturers; some of the instructors stay on even though they're permanent. They're cheap and they're convenient."

The houses, like the other buildings, were well separated, surrounded by mature trees and shrubs; the school brochure described them as "modest," but in fact they were tiny with tiny garages, but very private and quiet. There were nine of them.

"I understand Philip Seymour turned them down," Haliday said. "He opted for privacy, an apartment in town, just a few blocks from your dad's place, I understand. Ayers lived here a while; Melton lived here with her husband for nine years."

"They had a house on the coast," Ellen said. "Since he was gone so much, I guess this was a good deal for her."

"Okay," he said then. "Good job, Blair. Let's go to town. You can drop me at your place and I'll walk."

What was he after? she asked herself later. She had taken a shower, put on a warm robe, and was scrounging in her refrigerator. Just what was he after? Why was he focusing on the college and not the town? There must have been a dozen women in town then who were still around, and who might have been involved with Philip. Only those between twenty-one and forty, she recalled Patty's saying years before. Those between the age of consent and the age of desperation. Plenty of women in town would have fallen in between, she thought bitterly, remembering his chaste kiss on her forehead. She scowled and slammed the refrigerator door. Such arrogance! Such egotistical arrogance! She had loved him at seventeen, and two weeks later she had hated him at eighteen. How many other women had done the same kind of abrupt about-face?

Later, she watched the clock hands edge to nine, nine-thirty, a quarter to ten . . . At ten-thirty she went to bed. Bev had not come by; no one had come by. If they had called, she didn't know it because she had not listened to the calls. She realized she had not checked her mailbox since Monday, had not read a newspaper all week. Neither had she called Jordan, she remembered, still wakeful and twitchy after midnight. There had been nothing to say to him.

Thursday was a repeat of Wednesday; she and Winona Kelly pulled files until noon. She was invited to lunch in Conference Room D again, but today Janice Ayers was there, too.

Haliday was at the end of the table, Janice at his elbow, with papers spread out between them and on down the table.

"Help yourself," Haliday said, waving toward the tray at the other end of the table. She took a sandwich and sat down at that end.

"Okay, this one," Haliday said, pointing to a paper.

"Psychodrama and Other Games," Janice said. "Easy. He taught personality types out of Jung, had them role-play characters, and go into the fallacies of the method, and the strengths." She straightened up. Apparently they had been at this for some time. "That's how he taught. By involving them in every possible way. Demonstrations, role playing, participation." She pointed to the same paper. "Like this one, Psychohistory and Myth. He had them choose an historical subject from a list he provided and then research that person thoroughly and psychoanalyze him or her. Afterward, he extracted quotes from their papers, ran the list down the side, and had them try to link the quoted words to the proper name. Most of them failed entirely, which was his point. What people do and what they say are often at variance."

"Good teacher. That's your point?" Haliday said.

"Good! My God, I'm good, everyone who stays here is good. Philip was the most brilliant teacher I ever knew." She leaned back in her chair. "Do I get to eat?"

Haliday laughed. "Sorry. I forgot. Let's, before Blair finishes it all off."

They got up and took sandwiches from the tray; Haliday poured milk. Janice got coffee from the automatic machine on the other table. Eating, Haliday returned to the list. He put his finger on an item, glanced at Janice, who was taking a bite, waited, and then said, "What about this one, Shamanism and Modern Cult Figures?"

She finished chewing and took a swallow of coffee. "What it says. He was convinced that with the proper buildup, normal healthy people would believe whatever the cult leader wanted them to believe." At the other end of the table Ellen stopped eating. "He had an experiment he was anxious to try and couldn't, for obvious reasons. He believed he could convince a group of pretty random people that a totally inert substance was a powerful hallucinogenic, and that they would then hallucinate exactly as if they had ingested LSD."

"You believe that?" Haliday asked.

Ellen got up to pour coffee that she didn't want, and stood at the window with her back to them. It was raining again. She was remembering Patty's answer to her question, what had they done with the mushrooms. *We ate them and went to sleep.* He had been playing a game with them, she thought, and listened to what Janice was saying.

"I didn't, but now I'm not so sure. Some people have power naturally, we call it charisma. Philip had it. I'm sure every good shaman had it."

"Why couldn't he try it?"

"It's a very dangerous game to put anyone under your spell, Lieutenant. It's dangerous to teach anyone how to hallucinate, to start a process you may not be able to control."

There was a long pause; Ellen didn't turn from the window to look at them. He had been playing a game that he had known could be dangerous . . .

"What about the book he was writing? Did he show you the manuscript? You know what it was about?"

"I never saw it," she said, "but he talked about it from time to time. Part was about his work with his students. He was very innovative, and honest about his failures and his successes. He said I was in it, and did I mind? He wanted a reaction. I laughed and said if he used my name, I'd get a hefty cut of the Seymour millions."

"He was using his love affairs as material?"

"Everything he did was material one way or another. What you have to understand, Lieutenant, is that the whole world was a petri dish for Philip, and he found everything in it interesting."

"While he stayed on the outside," Haliday said. "Did you love him, Dr. Ayers?"

She laughed. "No. I might have come to love him, but I woke up. Have you ever watched a snake feed?"

Ellen felt her whole body tense with the words. Why was she talking about that particular experiment, talking about snakes?

"It unhinges its jaw and swallows its prey whole," Janice was saying. "You can watch the lump that was a living creature as it moves down the body, slowly diminishing. I was fascinated by Philip, but after you've seen the snake feed a time or two, the fascination also diminishes. I preferred to stay on the outside, and after a time I didn't care to remain a Philip watcher; we became friends in a way, I suppose." There was a rustle of motion. "Now I'm going back to my own world. It's been fun."

Ellen heard her movements, then her steps, the door opening, closing.

"You can come back now, Blair," Haliday said. "You haven't finished your sandwich."

She made sure her hands were steady before she left the window and returned to the table.

"How's it coming in the catacombs?"

"We'll finish this evening, I think. Then there will be the current files in the records office downstairs. They won't take long."

"Good. What do you think, Blair? Did Ayers love him?"

Ellen set her cup down hard. "She said not, Haliday. What else can I tell you?"

He chuckled. "She can't recall the name of a single woman he had an affair with. Curious, isn't it?"

"I don't think so."

"I didn't think you would," he said mildly. "Eat your lunch." But before she could take another bite, he pushed a paper toward her. "Have a look at that. Tell me, as a reasonable person, if you saw an apartment with all that stuff in it, would you assume the occupant intended to come back?"

Philip's apartment, she realized. This was a list of what had been found. She had thought it was just a few odds and ends at the time, but this was a long list. Suits, outdoors clothes, other clothes, books, the typewriter, a stereo and records, television, photographs . . . She read it over again and shook her head. "I'd think he was coming back," she said. "I never realized it was this much."

"I'm getting that from everyone except Ayers. Seems word went out that he left a few things and took off."

"But his family should have raised objections," Ellen said.

"Sheriff Craxton says there was a lot of infighting going on at the time. They seemed to accept that he took off to annoy them. They deny anything of the sort now."

She pushed her unfinished sandwich away and drank the rest of her coffee. It was bitter and cold. "Why do you keep telling me things like that? You're implying that the sheriff knew, or should have known, it wasn't a case of a man driving away. Why are you doing this?"

"You think the sheriff would deliberately hide something like this?"

"No. I think he'd bend a lot in little ways. No students get arrested for drunken driving, or searched for possession of substances, things like that. This serious? No."

"That's why I tell you stuff, Blair. I'm sort of using you as a sounding board, find out what people around here are thinking. You do just fine."

That was part of it, she thought, but not the whole truth. She stood up. "I'd better get back to work." At the door she paused and

looked at him. "Why are you concentrating on the college? There are a lot of town women who might have become involved with him."

He reached for the last sandwich. "I have people asking questions all over town, believe me. But, Blair, this started and ended right here on this campus."

"Thanks, Haliday," she said. "That's really reassuring." She could hear his chuckle as she left.

It was after four-thirty when she and Winona Kelly finished the files in the archives. "You can go on ahead if you want," Ellen said when she finished checking the last batch of copied files. "I'll just put this stuff back first."

"I'll wait," Winona said.

Ellen shrugged and began to refile the records. "Did he tell you not to leave me here?"

"Not just like that. He was sore because a reporter or someone got to you yesterday."

Ellen bit her lip and continued to replace the records. That bastard, she thought savagely. He was keeping an eye on her. But why? There wasn't anything to connect her to Philip Seymour. Someone surely had told him about the age parameters Philip had set; he must know she had been well out of them. Or maybe he believed Philip had made an exception in her case.

Today Winona held an umbrella over both of them as they walked back to the administration building. "Can't wait to get to my motel and get a shower," Winona said. "You wouldn't believe files could be so dirty, would you?" She chattered and popped her gum, never expecting a response apparently. "I grew up over in Bend," she said. "Just can't get used to this rain. Everything I have on feels clammy."

Ellen nodded. Shower, change of clothes, something hot to eat and drink . . . Her needs seemed very simple at the moment. Then she began to think about the list of things Philip had left in his apartment. Clothes, outdoor wear . . . She was frowning slightly when they entered the administration building, where many people were milling about, students, work-study students, office workers. She saw Rita coming from the records room and went to her.

"Will you give this to Dr. Melton?" she asked, handing her the list of files they had copied that day. "I have to see the lieutenant. She may be gone before I'm through upstairs." It was close to five; she hoped Hilde would go on home at five.

Rita said sure, no problem, took the list and headed back toward her own office. Ellen went up the stairs with Winona. When they passed the door of Conference Room A she saw with surprise that the furniture had been rearranged in there, and several groups of people sat at tables separated from one another. She recognized John Wooster from maintenance at one of the tables, and two cafeteria workers at others. He really was having everyone questioned, she thought in wonder.

When they reached Conference Room D the door was open and Haliday was reading a typed sheet of paper.

"Finished?" he asked.

"Pretty much," Ellen said. "Just one question. On that list of stuff in Philip Seymour's apartment, there wasn't a tuxedo mentioned, a powder-blue tux. Would anyone have just included it among the other clothes?"

"Philip watchers saw him in a light blue tux? The night of the big party?"

She nodded. "That's what I heard." Patty had seen him in it, had raved that he looked like a movie star.

He glanced at Winona. "You can take off. See you in the morning. Come on in, Blair. Close the door. If Kelly stays, she goes on overtime," he said. "You're on straight salary, aren't you?"

"Yes. But that's all I wanted to bring up. I didn't know if anyone had mentioned it."

She remained at the door; he began to rummage through papers. He motioned for her to join him. "Have a look," he said as he ran his finger down a sheet of paper he had extracted from a pile.

"I'd like to go home," she said.

He paid no attention, merely beckoned again, and angrily she closed the door and joined him at the table.

"Would you say anything on that list looks like formal evening wear? Two sports jackets, gray suit, three pairs of jeans . . . Where do you suppose he changed after the dance?"

"I don't know. In his van maybe."

"That would be strange," he murmured. "Five-minute drive to a closet full of clothes. Why change in the van?"

"Maybe he was more than five minutes away. Maybe he never went home after the dance."

Haliday straightened up and slowly he nodded. "I think you've got it, Blair."

The door opened and Hilde Melton came in. She stopped when she saw Ellen, and stood for a moment studying her. Then she continued into the room. "Lieutenant Haliday, I meant to speak to you alone. I thought Ellen had left, but perhaps it's better this way. I want Ellen to return to her regular duties tomorrow. You have enough of your own people to conduct any further searches of our files. There are people in the current-records room to give you any assistance you may need."

Good, Ellen thought, no microfiches.

"I don't know," Haliday said. "She's really been helpful."

"Lieutenant, look at her. She's a nervous wreck over all this nonsense. Janice Ayers has mentioned that this is too much for Ellen, doing police work on such a ghastly case. People who have known her all her life have gone out of their way to comment. That awful woman reporter who seems to think she has privileges just because she was a student here, even she has commented. It was a mistake to offer you Ellen's help. I wish to rectify my mistake."

Ellen grasped the back of a chair. Beverly! Bev had threatened her by saying how desperate they were, and now she was adding weight to the threat through Hilde Melton.

Hilde came to Ellen and put her arm around her shoulders. "I'm very sorry, dear. I shouldn't have let you get this involved." Then she said fiercely, "Ellen will return to my office tomorrow. She works for me and the college, after all, not for your office." She tightened her arm for a moment and then released Ellen and patted her shoulder. "You go on home. It's well past quitting time, and it's been a long day."

Ellen nodded. All she wanted to do was go home and try to think this through. They were desperate, afraid she would tell the police, threatening . . . Were the threats real? *What happened that night back at the fire?* She looked at Haliday, who was watching her. "I'm pretty tired," she said.

"Come to my office when you arrive in the morning," Hilde said. "All that work you've had to put off is still waiting."

Haliday was stuffing papers into his briefcase. "Ms. Blair," he said, "can you give me a lift to town?"

Hilde glared at him. Ellen nodded. They had to fight, she understood; Hilde had worked too hard to surrender her authority without a struggle, and Haliday acted like a man who was used to getting his way. Let them, she thought, she just wanted out.

No one spoke again until they got downstairs and said good night at Hilde's office door. Ellen and Haliday left the building, dashed through the rain to her car, and got in. She began to drive.

"She doesn't have any kids, does she?" he asked after a moment.

"Who? Dr. Melton? No."

"Widow now for what, four years? You know the papers are writing more about the famous Walter Melton than about her? Died in Sumatra, didn't he?"

"You know more about it than I do," she said tightly. "I wasn't here at that time."

"Sumatra," he said. "Had an accident, got bad care, infection set in, and he came home and died in a Portland hospital. Never even made it back to Crystal Falls. Tough. So all she has now is the college. See, Blair, I'm wondering why she's come on so maternal about you. You sick or something?"

"I am perfectly well," she said, clipping the words.

"I thought so," he said. "Was that awful woman reporter Beverly Kirchner? Is she the one who cornered you yesterday?"

"Yes," she snapped.

"And she was Seymour's student," he commented. "Such a small town, everything keeps coming back to home plate, doesn't it?"

When had he had time to learn Bev's name? She bit her lip and made no comment. As if reading her thoughts, he said, "In police work you train yourself to make connections, to notice things and remember them, things that relate to the case in hand, at least. I saw her name on the list of people still around. Burt Craxton, the sheriff's son, is another one. Interesting, isn't it? Anyway, like I was saying, when you get in the right mode you notice things, like you noticing no blue tux was on that list, and dredging up a memory."

"Where should I drop you?" she asked, stopped at the corner of Main and Adams. Her apartment was a block away.

"Your place, I'll walk from there."

"You'll get soaked." The hotel was five blocks away, city hall three, nothing farther than six blocks, but he would get soaked.

"Got an umbrella," he said cheerfully, and opened his briefcase to pull out a collapsible umbrella.

She turned the corner and suddenly she thought, he wanted to make sure she went home; he was keeping her under observation, just as Winona Kelly had kept an eye on her, and the uniformed officer . . . She jerked to a stop at her driveway.

He got out and snapped his umbrella open. "See you tomorrow, Blair." He started down the street toward town.

Inside her apartment she stared at the blinking answering machine and finally started to listen to the calls: Patty, an old friend or two, her mother, and then Bev's voice: "Remember, Ellen, I get the story first. For old-time's sake." She hit the stop button and erased the tape.

They were using Bev to keep the pressure on her, she understood, because Bev had a legitimate excuse for hanging around. She tried to remember what the others were all doing now: John Le Croix had married money, had a dairy farm in Tillamook; Burt Craxton was in state government, a man with a future, they said; Sheila had married him, they had two children; Les had a car dealership in Salem, other businesses; Patty was a librarian. They all had a lot to lose.

Why didn't Bev tell them that Ellen would not talk about that night? Why didn't Patty? Then she thought of it from their viewpoint. She was working for the police, was closeted with the lieutenant for long stretches of time, went driving with him . . . If he had set out deliberately to make it look as if she would talk, he couldn't have done a better job of it. She felt a rush of gratitude toward Hilde Melton for demanding an end to it, for demanding Ellen's return to her own work. The word would get out. Bev would know, she would tell the others.

Philip would have had them hallucinating, doing crazy things maybe, and then if he told them the mushrooms were plain mushrooms, not hallucinogenic, what would they have done? She remembered what Janice Ayers had said: It's dangerous to start a process you can't control. How much did Janice know? *What happened back at the fire?* How far would they go to make sure no one ever found out? Then she realized that they would never feel safe as long as she lived.

She should tell Haliday, she thought wildly. At least she would have police protection. She shook her head. He would believe them, not her; her protection would be a cell.

Suddenly she was weeping, and furiously she swiped at her cheeks and then went to shower. The tears kept flowing as she cursed, "Damn them all. Just damn them all!"

On Friday the sun was shining, the forecast was for a high in the low seventies. The mood of the students on campus was festive; this

was the last day before spring break. Frisbees had come out, and Rollerblades, and skateboards. People were already packing up their cars, ready to leave as soon as the last class was finished. When Ellen parked at the administration building, she could almost believe the last few days had been an illusion; this was how life was supposed to be. The uniformed officer at the entrance of the building brought her down again.

Rita met her in the corridor. "She wants you." She hurried away on her own errand.

Hilde was on the phone. She looked worn, and for the first time she looked her age. She motioned to Ellen to wait, finished her conversation in a low voice, and hung up.

"I have a trustee meeting for Monday," she said tiredly. "They want a complete list of the classes Philip taught here, his file, including his application and recommendations, and his evaluation file. They also want every article we have about this affair." She indicated a large stack of newspapers on the low round table across from her desk. "They want a scapegoat," she said. "Thank God I was just an errand girl."

The phone rang. She closed her eyes briefly and said, with her hand on the telephone, "Take the newspapers to your office. Two folders, one of clippings, one of Philip's files." She lifted the phone and waved Ellen out.

In her own office, Ellen glanced through the stack of newspapers. They were from Bellingham down to Los Angeles, from Denver, Chicago . . . The Seymour name and the bizarre jewelry, the bones, a naked man . . . She hadn't realized it had become a national sensation.

She retrieved the Seymour files first and then started on the newspapers. After the first few articles she stopped reading and simply scanned to determine if they were about the school or Philip. There were several long articles about Walter Melton, the honors he had accumulated, the degrees, the books he had written, where he had found various treasures . . . She broke for lunch and went to the cafeteria, where no one paid any attention to her. So much for Hali-day's fears of her being mobbed by reporters, she thought derisively, and returned to her office and the newspapers.

The Seymour family had many articles; she hesitated, then clipped them all. If Hilde didn't want them, she would take them out later. More about Melton's travels, an article about his accident and fatal infection. A history of the school. Her eyes were burning,

and newsprint was smeared on her hands. She left black prints on whatever she touched. An article about Jordan. She clipped that one and put it in her purse.

"Hi, Blair."

She looked up to see Haliday at her door. He surveyed the tiny office, scraps of paper everywhere, the disorderly heap of mutilated papers, the telephone on the floor where she had moved it to make more room on her desk.

"Your face is dirty," Haliday said.

"And I'm busy."

"Drop in upstairs before you take off, okay?"

"It's beautiful outside, you can walk to town."

He grinned. "And maybe I will, but drop in anyway. See you, Blair."

She kept working, article after article. Late in the day Hilde came in.

"How's it coming?"

"Okay, I guess. Here's Philip Seymour's files, and the newspapers aren't as bad as you thought they might be. The one I'm doing now could have been written by a publicist from the school. Honors of graduates, high positions, art exhibitions, that sort of thing. Pretty nice."

Hilde took the Seymour file and then said, "That many left to do?" There were a lot of newspapers Ellen hadn't touched yet.

"I'll take them home," Ellen said. "I told my parents I'd have dinner with them, but it will be an early evening. I'll finish them afterward and get them sorted by category, and bring them to you tomorrow."

Hilde nodded. "Just don't work too late. You look tired."

Ellen started to cut again as soon as Hilde was gone. She wondered if the puff she was clipping had been written by a graduate, and then she stopped cutting. Art exhibitions, she thought; their art department was excellent, and Newton Bridges had been there fifteen years ago, and was now head of department. She started to cut again and stopped again. Something was nagging, she realized, and she closed her eyes a moment.

Then she heard a question in her mind: Who painted the snakes all over Philip's body? It was followed by a second question: Where were the paints? Not listed in the stuff in his apartment. Would he have kept paints in his van? That time of year, the end of May, the interior would have been like a furnace.

She didn't move as she thought through the night of the party. Philip had gone with someone, or followed someone home. And the next day had that same person painted the snakes on him? He couldn't have done that alone. Then he went to the campsite and . . . *What happened back at the fire?* She shook her head, trying to clear the question away. The important thing, she told herself, was that someone else knew what he had done, what he had been up to with his costume, his jewelry, the body paint. Janice? Would she have been able to resist watching his experiment?

She had not moved yet when there was a tap on her door and it swung open. "Good, you're still here. I thought you'd ducked out on me." Haliday did not enter, but regarded her with interest from across the tiny space. "Your face is still dirty."

She stood up. It was ten past five. "I was just ready to leave," she said.

He came into the room and closed the door. "Great. Look, I really need someone who recognizes names to have a look at those student newspapers from Philip's days. Would you? Not on school time, but on your own time? I know it's an imposition."

She shook her head. "I have a dinner date. Sorry."

"Not tonight, tomorrow. It won't take long. We've pulled the right ones out; they're all ready to view. Winona's doing her best, but she doesn't know anyone."

"I have a job to finish tomorrow," she said, gathering up newspapers into a manageable pile.

"After that."

She stopped moving and looked at him. "What do you want from me, Haliday? Why me?" Suddenly she remembered something else and sat down hard. "You knew the first time you met me who I was, that Dad owns the garden store. I said Philip had come to the store and you asked if he was a gardener. You knew. What do you want?"

He smiled. "Good morning, Blair." He held up his briefcase. "Look, I'm ready to split, too. Give me a lift? Maybe I'd better drive you this time, you shouldn't touch anything with those hands."

She gathered her things silently, and they walked out to her car. The sun was low now, but the day was still warm and pleasant. The campus was nearly deserted. She felt numb with fear.

At her apartment he went to the door with her and followed her inside. "You wash up a bit and I'll show you something," he said, glancing about.

She put her things down on the kitchen table and went into the bathroom to wash her hands. Her face was filthy; she scrubbed it fiercely until her cheeks showed color again.

He was sitting at the table when she returned. She took the chair opposite him. The table was so small that the newspapers and other things she had put down covered it almost entirely. Haliday handed her a sheet of paper that was creased from folding.

She read: *Ask Ellen Blair who killed Philip Seymour.*

She stared at it so long the words began to dance. Finally she looked up. "Why didn't you?"

"Who killed Philip Seymour?"

"I don't know."

"That's what I thought you'd say. That's why I didn't ask you before. But someone seems to think you know something."

"Where did it come from? Who gave it to you?"

"Mail. In my box bright and early Tuesday morning. Postmarked Salem. Of course, that's just a fifteen-mile drive, not difficult to run over, drop a letter in a box, and scoot back home."

"But that's the day you came. No one knew about you."

"Someone did. See, I got on the case on the Friday before that, reviewed everything over the weekend, came up here on Monday, and checked into the hotel. Your sheriff knew by Friday, and he called one or two of the trustees, who no doubt called a number of people including your Dr. Melton, who might have told her own confidantes. Word gets around in a small town, Blair. You should know that."

"You've been playing a game with me, watching me."

"Someone thinks you know something, and maybe you do. I tried making you a killer and it just didn't work, not now, not at seventeen. I mean, if you'd had anything going with Philip Seymour everyone in town would have known about it, and no one did. But did you see something, overhear something, get told something? Maybe. Did you?"

He was still playing his game, she thought. Carefully she put the sheet of paper down on top of the newspapers. He ignored it, watching her. What did he expect? That she would break down and blurt out a confession? She stood up.

When she spoke, her voice sounded as if she had rehearsed this scene. "I have to get cleaned up. I have a dinner date."

"Will you help out with the student newspapers?"

She couldn't hide her incredulity. "Me? Aren't I a suspect now?"

He laughed. "Well, you're the only one anyone's fingered. On the other hand, you're the only one to bring up the blue tux. After lunch tomorrow?"

Helplessly she nodded. He picked up the sheet of paper and returned it to his briefcase, and got up from the table.

"See you in the administration building. Around one?"

She nodded again.

Time spent with her parents usually was a good time; she loved them very much, and they made no attempt to hide their love for her. Her father never had a lot to say, but he smiled at her from the moment she arrived until she left, and her mother always made the things Ellen had loved as a child, and still did. That night she probably had made Ellen's favorite dishes, but Ellen was not aware of it. She left before nine.

Her father's store fronted North Main; the residence was behind it, facing First. She kept off Main, where she was likely to run into people she knew; at least on the back streets they were all inside their houses. She knew every house, every occupant, what the kids were up to, where the adults worked, where they had gone to school . . . The houses were big, with well-cared-for yards and gardens. Where the houses had started out small, they had been added to over the generations until they were an architect's nightmare, but they were comfortable, suitable for people who preferred the small town to anything else. She could go to any door, knock, be invited in, given a cup of coffee or a glass of wine; they would chat, gossip, be at ease. They were all people who had babysat her, whose kids she had babysat. Kids she had gone to school with, she thought then, had grown up, married, moved. Changed. And there was not a person in town she could talk to.

With some bitterness she thought of the phrase she had grown up believing: a town of eighteen hundred people and no secrets. But how many of these pleasant houses sheltered people as desperate as she was, with secrets as devastating as hers?

Listening to her mother rattle on and on about nothing in particular had made her realize how much she needed to talk to someone, to tell someone about that night, to try to sort it out by talking it out.

Nothing had changed, she thought in wonder. Everything kept getting more complicated, but nothing changed. She had driven off in his van, and he had gone back to the group at the fire.

But what if he hadn't gone back? What if Patty had told the truth, he never returned? She slowed her pace, no longer noticing the houses or gardens or the scant traffic until she reached Main and had to stop for several cars. She had told the truth, and maybe Patty had told the truth, too. And that meant that someone else had been there, and that person had seen Ellen, and that's what the note to Haliday was about. She began to hurry, wanting to be home where she could think of what that meant, to think of Janice Ayers, who had known about Philip's experiment. As a psychologist, would Janice have found that experiment irresistible?

She heard Jordan calling her name and looked around to see him trotting down Main. *Not now*, she thought, but she stopped and waved, and he crossed the street to catch up.

"I was watching for you to pass Papa's," he said. "Good ravioli tonight. Your mom said you'd left already, or I'd have gone by their house. Walk you home?"

"Sure. I had to leave early because I have homework. Hilde loaded me up for tonight and tomorrow."

He caught her hand and held it as they walked. "Not even Hilde expects you to work twenty-four-hour days," he said lightly, but his grasp of her hand was hard.

"Just this once. For a special meeting of the trustees on Monday. They're driving her crazy." They had reached her building.

"Can I come in?" he asked at the door. When she hesitated he released her hand.

"I really do have an awful lot of work," she said. "This won't go on much longer, and everything will get back to normal."

"It's been going on for more than a month," he said evenly. "It just gets worse. Ellen, I don't care what happened years ago, what you did, what anyone else did. I simply want you back."

"Please, let's talk about it later, next week, not now. I'm tired and I have work to do and I have to get some sleep . . ." Her voice faltered and she inserted her key in the lock.

"Right," he said. He walked away.

She looked after him, started to call him back, then bit her lip and went inside. Why not? she demanded at the mirror. There was no real answer until she had hung up her jacket and gone to the table to stand regarding the newspapers with loathing. Then she knew why not. If he had come in, he would have pressured her to tell him what was wrong, and she probably would have done so, because she was desperate to talk to someone. She realized she had

known from the start what he would say: don't say anything, don't get any more involved than you already are. It will blow over.

That wasn't fair, she thought almost wildly, and anyway that was exactly what she had been doing, what she intended to keep doing. Even if that was the only sensible thing to do, she did not want to hear it from him. But what else was there to say?

Angry at the impasse, she sat at the table, ignored the papers, and thought about that night. Whoever painted Philip must have gone either with him or after him to the campsite, and must have been there when he put Ellen in the van and she drove away. And then what? There was no answer, but it no longer was a certainty that Philip had returned to the fire. Also, that person wanted Ellen to talk about it, implicate the others. And that observer, she added, feeling icy, could in apparent innocence mention to any of the six that Ellen was talking to the police, or intended to talk, or that she had hinted she knew something vital. How much of a nudge would it take to goad desperation into action?

If she told Patty or Bev what she suspected, then what? She shook her head. To them it would be the same problem: if Ellen talked, they would be dragged into a police investigation of a sensational murder case that included drugs, an orgy in the woods, a naked teacher and his students . . . Would they even believe her? As far as they were concerned, she had left with Philip.

"All right," she said aloud and stood up, knocking some of the newspapers off the table. She had forgotten them. She put on coffee to get her through the next several hours of work, and she was glad that she would have a crack at the microfiches after all. If there were any gossip items linking any of the current staff to Philip, she wanted to see them. She did not even question her assumption that a woman had painted Philip and later killed him. She didn't believe it had been a student; it had been someone with a house or an apartment where he could hang out all day and his van not be seen by a passerby.

She assembled the clippings in the morning, sorting them by category, labeling them. By ten she was finished, but it was too early. Haliday had said after lunch. She didn't need him, she decided; she would deliver this stuff to Hilde and start on the microfiches by herself.

She found Hilde in her office in the administration building and handed her the folder of clippings. The building was deserted. Hilde

was dressed in jeans and a sweater, running shoes. The telephone was off the cradle.

"As soon as I wrap up a couple of things here," Hilde said, "I'm taking off for the cottage. My God, the phone has driven me crazy this week." She lifted the phone, grimaced, and put it down again on its side. "Thanks, Ellen. You get some rest this weekend. I won't be in Monday. I'll just go straight up to Portland, be back in the evening sometime. Maybe if things are settled down here, we can get some real work done."

They talked briefly about what needed doing on Monday; then Ellen left and headed for the back door and the path to the journalism building.

The path led among shrubs to the Little Agate Creek footbridge, wound among more shrubs and trees to the journalism building, where she cursed under her breath. Locked. She hadn't even thought of its being locked. She glared at the building, walked around it and up a dozen steps to try a different door, also locked. Haliday must have made arrangements to have it opened for him later. The building was ivied brick, as they all were, and very quiet. There would be some students on campus, she knew, but not up and around much before noon on a Saturday of spring break. From where she stood no other building was visible, no voices audible, just an eerie silence, and deep moist shadows. She shivered and started to retrace her steps, resigned to waiting until one to return and work under the watchful eye of Haliday or one of his flunkies. Then she heard the other door close. Someone had gone in.

Maybe he was early, she thought, heading back to the main entrance. Before she got there, she reconsidered. She had not heard him approach, had not heard voices. She stopped again, then turned and hurried back to the administration building by a different path. The parking lot was empty. She didn't enter the building, just got in her car and drove away, thinking it could have been anyone, a maintenance person, the head of the department, an instructor, anyone. She realized her fear was becoming paranoia.

She had been avoiding everyone in her own town all week, and had no idea if reporters were still hanging around, but she drove to the outskirts of Salem to shop. At home again she put away the milk and eggs, fruit and bread, and it was still too early, not yet twelve-thirty. She began to gather up the cut-up newspapers, remembered the clipping about Jordan, and retrieved it from her purse. After

regarding it for a moment she added it to the papers to be bundled up for recycling. The only emotion she felt was surprise at feeling so little, even though by the act she had decided it was over with Jordan. If she let him, he would forgive her lack of trust, she knew, but the fact remained that she had not trusted him enough to confide the most dangerous secret she ever had. She wondered if Hilde would discard the clippings that concerned her former husband. Probably Hilde would keep them, she thought, remembering the wall of plaques, citations, certificates.

Then she frowned, trying to recall something she had noticed and forgotten again. Janice had been in the leather chair, Hilde pouring wine, Ellen looking around the personal collection that made the room human. Abruptly she went to the other room and rummaged in a desk drawer for a file folder. She hurried back to the kitchen and found several articles she had tossed because they had appeared in more than one newspaper; she put them in the folder.

Then she drove back to the college, this time to the president's mansion. She rang the bell. The housekeeper, Mrs. Lawrence, opened the door.

"Has Dr. Melton left yet?" Ellen asked.

"A couple of hours ago."

"I was afraid of that. I have some papers she wants to have on hand the minute she gets back home Monday. She told me to put them in the private sitting room if I missed her."

Mrs. Lawrence nodded and stepped back. "Come on in, Ellen."

"I won't be a minute."

Mrs. Lawrence walked with her. "That poor woman," she said. "All this business has her beside herself, I'm sure. She can use a rest from the telephone." She remained at the door of the sitting room when they got there.

Ellen crossed to a low table and put the folder down, remembering Janice over there in the leather chair, Hilde at the table, Ellen trying to avoid both of them, gazing straight ahead at the diplomas, certificates, plaques, one a handsome bronze inscribed, "President American Archaeology Society, May 31, 1980—May 31, 1986."

Mrs. Lawrence was still talking, she realized, after they left the room and were back at the entrance. She was only vaguely aware of the puzzled look the housekeeper gave her when she said, "Thanks," and hurried to her car.

She sat thinking for several minutes and then started her engine and drove out to the road and turned toward the campsite. One more thing, she thought.

She had not been back since that night, although she had driven past countless times on her way to the coast. Today she pulled into the gravel parking area. Few people used the site for camping overnight and only infrequently did anyone use it by day. People stopped to rest a minute, to take a walk, use the toilets, or maybe eat lunch, but it was fifteen miles to the coast from here and that was the destination of most people heading west on Crystal River Road. Today no one was in sight.

She pulled into the same spot Patty had used that night. Two other cars had been there, both of them in the center parking area, facing west, as her car was facing now. She nodded and got out of her car, and slowly walked the trail through the woods to the spot where they had made the fire near the river. The fir trees here were old growth and mammoth; the trail was like a tunnel, in perpetual dusk with glowing green mosses on rocks, trunks, fallen branches. The moss colored the dim light with its green reflection; it was like walking under water, without the water. She reached the clearing and looked all around it. The trail she had used was the only trail; the woods closed in on three sides, the river made up the fourth. Then she retraced her steps. The trail curved around trees; it was hard to find a straight line in the forests here. She remembered how his light had led the way like a living thing moving up and over rocks, a fallen tree trunk . . . She had been unable to look away from it. If anyone had been ahead of them with another light, she would not have seen it.

The little disk of light had led back to the parking area to his van, in line with the other cars, but facing the opposite way, toward town. If another car had been parked at the far end of the area, she would not have been able to see it. When the van lights came on, only the woods she had just left had been lighted, not the rest of the parking area.

"Blair, you're playing hookey." Haliday's voice sounded close by.

She jerked around to see him leaning against a tree near the road. "Are you following me?" she demanded. Her voice was shaky.

"Yep. Nice day for a walk in the woods."

She took a deep breath. "Haliday, I have something to tell you."

He straightened, took the few steps to the road and motioned to someone; when a car pulled up with a strange man driving, he went to it and spoke briefly. The man nodded, turned, and left again.

"Told him I'd hitch a ride," Haliday said, approaching Ellen. He pointed to a log. "Let's sit down."

On the log, plucking pieces of moss from the bark, not looking at him, she told him about that night, everything but names. For a long time he was silent. Then he said, "Show me the clearing."

She led the way. While he looked at the fire enclosure and examined the woods encircling the space, she stood at the bank of the river gazing at the water. At this time of year it was full to overflowing with rapids, churning white water, falls; it sounded very loud.

"What time did you get here?" he asked, suddenly at her side.

"Nine-thirty or later. It was getting dark."

"When did he show up?"

She shook her head. "At least two hours later, maybe more. I don't know."

He was scowling at the river below. "What made you tell me now?"

"I think someone will try to kill me," she said.

He looked at her swiftly, then motioned toward the fire enclosure. "One of them?"

"No. The one who killed Philip, if not directly, then through them, by goading one of them to do it. I think I was supposed to break before now, tell the whole story with names, and then a lot of people would have been involved and I would have been the chief suspect and she would have been out of it."

Very slowly Haliday said, "Who is she, Blair? Who are you talking about?"

Keeping her gaze on the frothy water below, she said, "Hilde Melton."

He let out a breath. "Ah, Blair, how we've all underestimated you. Give. Why?"

"She lied about her husband being home that weekend. He was in New York being inaugurated as president of the American Archaeology Society. She lied about having days off after that weekend. If Pryor had gone to Hawaii, she would have had to stay on the job. There's too much to do at the end of the school year for both of them to be gone. She would have known Philip had rented the apartment through the middle of June. That's the kind of detail work we flunkies keep track of. She could have gone any night to get the manuscript and letters. So many little things, like the way the van was parked as if it had come from the coast, not from town."

"What about the van?" Haliday asked.

"She talks about the cottage on the coast, but it's a big house, with a two-car garage. I think she hid the van there until late one

night when she drove down the coast somewhere and ran it off the road into the ocean. And her husband's car was always kept out there, so she could have used that to get back to town. The faculty houses have small garages," she added. "With glass panes. It would have been seen by the mailman or someone."

He sighed. "We're having the deep coves searched," he said. "Nothing so far, but we're still looking. I sure hoped something would turn up linking her to Seymour. No luck yet."

This time she looked at him in surprise. "You suspected her? Why?"

"You," he said. "I told her I wanted a crack at the files and she came on like a matchmaker, pushing you at me. After that note, it seemed curious. And I had to wonder why she hired you," he said almost apologetically. "You said it yourself, you're not presidential timber. A month or so after Langford bought that land and his plans became known, she hired you after getting along fine without an assistant for years. It seemed almost as if she did it just to keep you around, in case." He paused and added, "And her husband's schedule. I checked that as a matter of routine. He came out the following weekend."

They were both silent until she said, "None of this is very conclusive, is it?"

He laughed harshly.

After a moment she asked, "What are you going to do about me?"

"You planning to run away?"

"No."

"Then I'm going to think about it. How did you find the exact dates of her husband's inauguration?"

She told him about the private sitting room in the mansion filled with Walter Melton's proofs of achievement.

"Something of a pack rat?" he asked.

"Something . . ." She glanced at him, but he seemed absorbed in watching the swift river. "She might have kept anything from Philip, too. Not in the mansion, but in her private residence at the coast. Why did she go out there this weekend with so much going on?"

"Let's take a ride, Blair. Let's go look at the ocean."

He complained about her driving on the steep winding road, and she snapped that she knew every curve in it. The road was narrow, posted the entire length for no passing, for fifteen miles an hour,

ten miles; the forest pressed in close. The road descended precipitously. "Why do you keep telling me things?" she demanded, taking a curve too fast.

"Like I said, the more you know, the more help you are. A tight community like this one, if the door closes, it takes dynamite to get it open again. An insider helps. Don't go near her house. Head into the village. I want to use a telephone."

As they drew near the village of Crystal Beach, more and more young people appeared on the road, some walking, some on bicycles. "Spring break," she said, slowing to a crawl. She stopped at a filling station a few minutes later and watched him go to the telephone.

"Something to eat," he said when he got back. "A place with a view would be nice."

Crystal Beach had a population of five hundred, but today there were dozens of college students on the streets making it appear much more populous. Weekend traffic on 101 was heavy. Haliday shook his head at a Dairy Queen, and again at a hamburger joint, and then pointed to Cap'n John's Seafood House. So they were going to be here for a while, she thought, and pulled in to park.

It was a strange meal. They ordered, clam chowder for him, crab salad for her; he gazed out the window and said, "Pretty," and then became silent and remained silent.

This was a rugged section of coast, with cliffs, many rocks jutting up from the water, rocky tide pools, and a narrow strip of sand. The restaurant was seventy-five feet above the beach. Down there kids were flying kites, tossing Frisbees, clambering over mountainous piles of driftwood that from here looked like a giant's jackstraws carelessly abandoned. The water was deep blue and calm.

When the waiter came with coffee, he nodded, then ignored it. She sipped hers, waiting. He glanced at his watch several times, and the last time, got up. "Right back," he said and left. Fifteen minutes after he returned, he grinned at her. "Time to go. Whoever taught you to keep quiet so a man could think did a good job of it."

Her father, she thought, as they left the restaurant. Poor Dad had tried hard to teach her mother, who never had learned that particular lesson. She drove again, up 101 to Crystal River Road, back the way they had come for half a mile, and then she turned onto a narrow winding road, past two driveways, and into Hilde Melton's drive.

"What am I supposed to do?" she asked then, reluctantly eyeing the house ahead. It was a low, rambling, unpainted cedar building, the rustic look of the wood offset by stained-glass windows on this side. Trees misshapen by the wind, wind-carved boulders, a few pieces of silvered driftwood made up the yard. Beyond, the ocean was visible.

"You don't do a thing," Haliday said. "Not a peep."

They walked to the front stoop and he rang the bell.

Hilde was still wearing jeans and a sweater. She looked at the lieutenant, then at Ellen, and said angrily, "This is just too much! What are you doing out here? What do you want?"

"A couple of things came up," Haliday said. "Can we come in?"

"Ellen, I told you you don't have to work for this man any longer. Who is your superior, Lieutenant?" She moved aside to let them enter and slammed the door.

The room they entered was spacious and bright, with the stained-glass windows on one side and sliding glass doors on the other. A deck was beyond the doors with a view of the ocean. The furnishings inside were rattan and bentwood, with Indian print throws on chairs and a sofa, colorful cotton rugs on a wide plank floor with a nice gloss. On the deck the furniture was heavy wood, massive terracotta planters with greenery, nothing that would blow away.

"Captain Hersholt," Haliday said. "Dr. Melton, you said you and your husband came out here Saturday morning after the big party. Are you sure? Our information is that he was in New York and didn't get back here until the following week."

"You asked me about an event that happened thirteen years ago. I told you what I believed was true. We always came out here after the party, I assumed we did that time, too."

"I understand that your husband never attended college functions, that he stayed here on the coast when he was home."

"Your informant is mistaken."

"What kind of a car did your husband drive back then?"

Hilde was looking more and more angry; her face flushed deep crimson. She threw up her hands and turned her back on him, crossed the room to stand at the sliding door and gaze out. "This is insane," she said. "I don't remember what kind of car he had. He had a car and I had one."

Ellen had not moved from the door; she watched miserably. Haliday was strolling around, looking at things, a vase with pampas grass plumes, a bowl of seashells, a magazine . . .

"Was it a green seventy-nine Dodge two-door?"

"I don't know," Hilde snapped.

"You see, our information is that you took a Dodge like that to a body shop in Salem on Friday following the death of Philip Seymour. You told them your husband had driven it off the road into bushes or something and banged it up."

Hilde didn't move. After a moment she said, "I did one year. I don't remember when it was."

"The problem is I can't figure out how you managed to get it in town from out here and still have your own car available. I mean, if you drove out here and drove the Dodge back to town, your car must have stayed here. But on Saturday that week you went up to Portland and picked up your husband at the airport. Didn't you?"

She turned toward them; the low sun behind her was so brilliant that she was only a black shadow. "Whatever point you're trying to make, Lieutenant, just make it."

He nodded. "I think Seymour followed you out here to the coast the night of the party, and for a time your car, your husband's car, and his van were all here. When he went back to town in the van, you followed in your husband's car, and later drove the van back out, leaving your husband's car in the garage at the faculty residence. The following week you drove your car back to town, took your husband's car to the shop, and all the pieces were accounted for, or will be when you tell us where you dumped the van."

"And I don't give a damn what you think," she said coldly. "Now if you'll get out of here, I have things to do."

"I'm afraid I have to search your house, Dr. Melton," Haliday said.

"Just exactly what do you think you'll find?" she demanded. She went to the telephone on an end table. "You said Captain Hersholt, I believe."

Haliday nodded. "I'd be looking for Seymour's manuscript, personal letters, probably a lot of photographs, maybe a blue tuxedo, and a gold ring that looks like a snake."

Hilde looked past him at Ellen then. "You finally talked," she murmured. She stood with her hand on the telephone, then slowly removed it.

"I told him everything except names," Ellen said.

"Why stop there?"

"Why ruin a lot of other people? They were helpless, under his spell, as I was, and you were."

"This has been interesting," Hilde said, moving to the front door. "When you get a proper search warrant, Lieutenant, then we can talk about searching my house. Now leave."

She opened the door and stopped moving. Winona Kelly and a uniformed officer were on the porch. Winona held out a paper; Haliday reached past Hilde and took it, and then closed the door again. Hilde had turned waxy and pale.

She walked stiffly to the glass door and out to the deck. Haliday motioned to Ellen and they followed her. Another man in a gray suit was on the edge of the cliff facing the house. Hilde ignored him. "Lieutenant," she said, looking toward the ocean, "there's no need to tear up the house. In my bedroom, a cedar chest, locked. The key is in my purse on the dressing table."

When he left Hilde said in a low voice, "That Saturday, we played all day and ate out here at sunset. Such a beautiful day. Then he said he was going. I thought he would stay until Monday or Tuesday." She glanced at Ellen. "I wonder that you didn't break early. I thought you would. The need to tell someone is so terribly strong, isn't it?" She moved to the edge of the deck and stood with her head against a support post. "When he held your face and kissed your forehead, I hated him. I realized then that what he had planned involved women, sex, a ritual of some sort. I said you couldn't drive, you were drunk, or high or something. I told him if you crashed, if you killed yourself, he would be up against manslaughter. We followed you, watched you park and start to walk home. He wanted to stop, to get the van, but I kept driving." The wind was very cold coming in from the ocean; she seemed unaware of it. Ellen was shivering.

"Then I turned down the lane to the sheep pasture. I wasn't planning anything, I just did it. And he put his hand on mine on the steering wheel, and he said to keep going. Then farther on, he said, turn around here, and I did. He was saying things like Walter would be back in a few days, life would go on, we had our day in the sun, the sweetest memories were forged in tears and pain . . . I stopped the car, and he hurt my hand. Drive, he said, and I said no. No more. He said he would walk, but first he took my face in his hands, the way he had done to you. He said you were too young, but I was too old, and which was sadder, and he kissed me on the forehead and got out of the car and started to walk. He was in the headlights, walking away, nearly naked, covered with snakes . . . I don't think I meant to do anything. It was Walter's car, an automatic, and

suddenly it raced forward and hit him." She turned away from the wind finally. Her cheeks were wet with tears.

"He hit his head on the concrete at the end of the bridge," she said. "He was half off the bridge; his skirt had come off, and one sandal. I took off the other one. And I took a ring. I rolled him the rest of the way off the bridge into the brambles. They supported him for a long time, but finally he sank down out of sight."

She sighed and moved to one of the heavy chairs and sat down. "Men cast such long shadows, Ellen. My famous husband, then Pryor, and finally Philip. His shadow reaches across thirteen years."

Ellen didn't move. She felt she had frozen into the floor of the deck, had become an ice woman. Neither spoke again until Haliday came out to the deck.

"Dr. Melton, I'm afraid I have to place you under arrest." Another man read her rights to her; Haliday asked if she understood, and she looked bored and said of course.

"I will make a statement, nevertheless," she said then. "Philip Seymour came to my house and forced me to accompany him at knife point. He forced me to drive his van to that place by the bridge, where he undressed and was trying to take my clothes off. We struggled. The van door opened and he fell out and hit his head. I believe he died instantly. When I tried to help him, he fell off the bridge. I was panic stricken. I think I must have blacked out then because the next thing I knew I was here, at the coast house in his van. Later, I removed his personal belongings and kept them just in case his body was recovered and anyone claimed them. I left his van in the parking lot by the Hilton Head lighthouse." She stood up and regarded Ellen for a moment. "That is my statement. I won't change a word of it."

She left with Winona Kelly and another detective.

When Haliday came back, Ellen was still standing rigidly fixed in place. "Will they believe her?" she asked.

"No. But who's going to dispute her story? It's her word against the wind. Come on, let's go. Your lips are blue."

At her car he said, "Blair, would you be offended if I drive? To tell the truth your driving scares the hell out of me."

Wordlessly she handed him the keys.

"What will happen," he said, heading back toward Crystal Falls, "is she'll talk to her lawyer, who will talk to some of her trustees, who will talk to the prosecutor, and that will be that. She'll go up for something—manslaughter, obstruction of justice—something

like that. It will all be discreet with little publicity. Case closed now instead of dragging out for the next five years with an uncertain conclusion."

"You're driving too fast," she said after a few minutes.

"You've got a nerve, Blair."

"Look, Haliday, I know the road, every curve, and at this time of day, this is too fast."

He slowed down.

"You used me," she said. "You left us together so she would talk. You gambled that if she knew I hadn't told you any names, she would think of a story that would let her save face. That was deliberate, wasn't it?"

He squealed around a curve and slowed down again. "You'll probably lose your job, won't you? What next?"

That was the only answer she would ever get, she knew. "I'll have to stay until the end of the school year. It's going to be a real mess. Then, I don't know."

She realized that she was now at the same place she had been two years ago when she had come home defeated. She hadn't been able to keep a husband, to keep a job, to find a new job, and she had run home. After that the decisions had been made for her. She hadn't resisted because she hadn't realized how adrift she was. Even Jordan, she thought with a twinge of guilt; even with him she had let herself drift with the flow, accepting easy choices, pretending no decision had to be made as long as nothing was stated overtly. Now she had to deal with that. And Patty, she added. Something had ended there, too. How far those six people would have gone to avoid embarrassment she couldn't guess, but they had turned their backs on murder, however they justified it. She thought of Hilde, who believed she finally had worked her way out of the shadows, only to be dragged back in. And of the other women Philip had swallowed whole, diminished. They passed the college, the president's mansion, the beautifully maintained gardens, and she thought clearly, whatever she did after June, it would not be here.

Haliday kept driving through Crystal Falls at the posted limit of twenty miles an hour. "Where are you going?" she demanded.

"I have to check in at Salem," he said. "Didn't I mention that?"

"Do you own a car, Haliday?"

"You know, if you ever decided to go in for a little more schooling, criminology, something like that, you probably could get a recom-

mendation or two to make the special investigation unit. If that would interest you."

"Forget it, Haliday," she snapped.

"Yeah, Blair, I will. For one thing, you'd have to call me Lieutenant, or even sir. Protocol. Show a little respect for authority."

"So already I'm disqualified," she said coldly.

He laughed. When he stopped the car at the courthouse in Salem, he got out and waited until she walked around to get behind the wheel, and then held out his hand. "You're pretty good, Blair."

They shook hands. "Thanks, Haliday. For a lot."

He nodded. She got in the car and fastened her seat belt.

"Be seeing you, Blair."

She waved and started to drive. In the rearview mirror she could see him watching her until she turned the corner.



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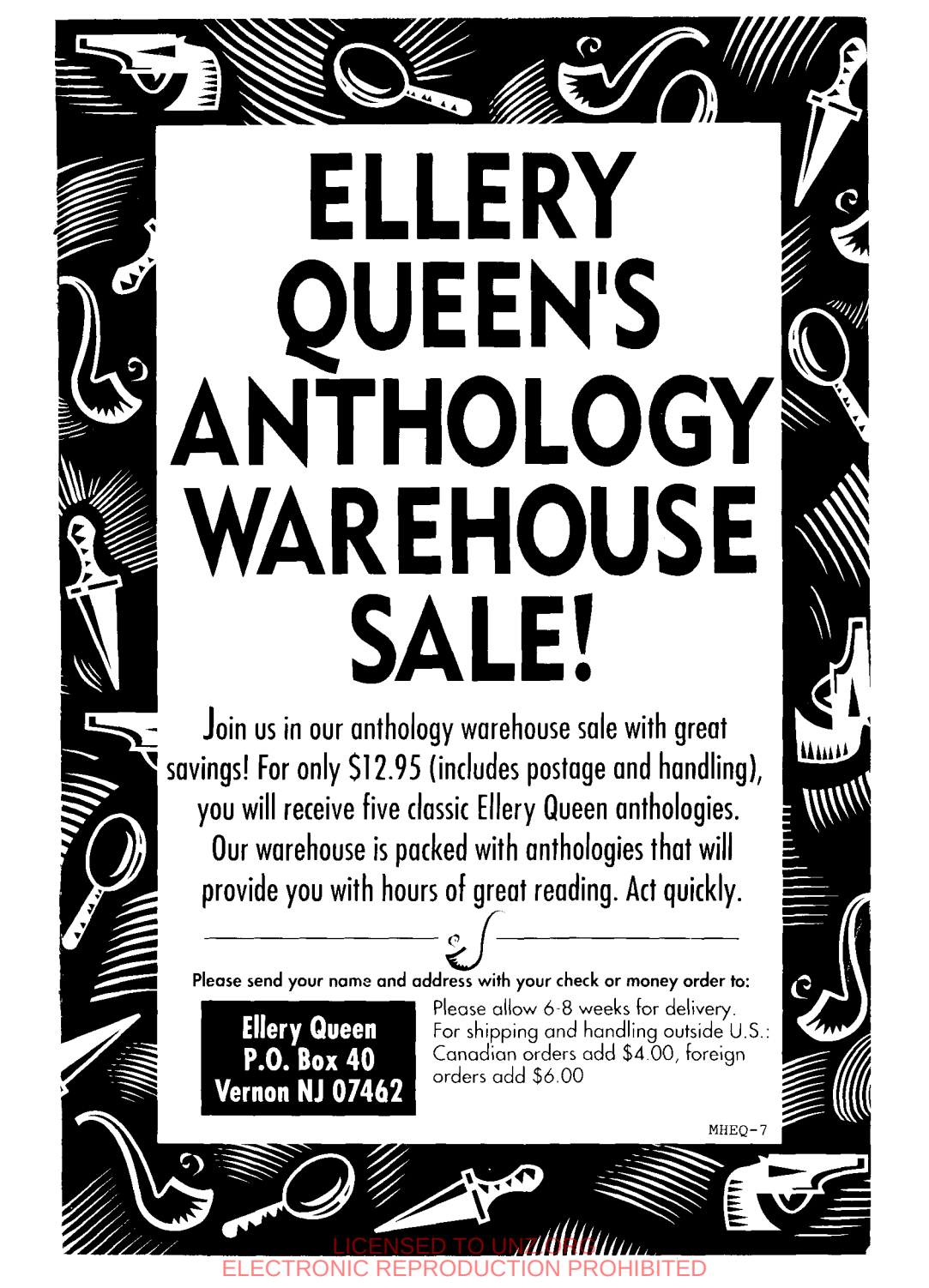
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